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## **BRITISH TRADE UNIONISM**

*by the same author*

**The Condition of the Working  
Class in Britain**

**Tolpuddle and To-day**

**This Final Crisis**

**The Post-War History of the  
British Working Class**

**BRITISH  
TRADE UNIONISM**  
**AN OUTLINE HISTORY**

*by*  
**ALLEN HUTT**

**LONDON**  
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## PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

FOR this edition the last Chapter has been entirely re-written and brought up to date ; otherwise only a few minor corrections have been necessary.

The division of our trade union history into four periods, I may take this opportunity to point out, is intended to make clear the four main stages in the development of the movement, themselves reflecting different stages in the development of social and economic relationships. The *first* may be briefly described as the revolutionary period (though it was not uniformly so) ; the *second* was the period of the founding and flourishing of classic craft unionism, which produced the first stable national unions and, though it was a breeding-ground of reformism, successfully conducted a series of major struggles on broad democratic issues, both national and international ; the *third* period marked the birth of the " New Unionism," the mass organisation of the unskilled and the consequent general revival and extension of trade unionism ; the *fourth* period began when, with the war of 1914, the top leadership of the movement (or perhaps I might put it colloquially : the " upper crust " of union officialdom) first saw their function as " part of the social machinery of the State " and, by and large, did not thereafter depart from the acceptance of governing class policies thus implied.

G. A. H.

Highgate, July 1942.

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## PERIOD I

### CHAPTER I : THE UNIONS AS "SCHOOLS OF WAR" (1800-50)

THE British working class were, as Marx said, the "first-born sons of modern industry." So they were naturally the pioneers of trade unionism, the organisation of the economic struggle of the new class of working men against the new class of capitalist employers, against the competition "of all against all which reigns in modern civil society."<sup>1</sup> Here lay the social significance of the formation of trade unions and the conduct of strikes against the low wages, long hours and abominable conditions which marked the early years of the factory system. Said Frederick Engels, observing these things on the spot, and in their full flower :

What gives these unions and the strikes arising from them their real importance is this, that they are the first attempt of the workers to abolish competition. They imply the recognition of the fact that the supremacy of the bourgeoisie is based wholly upon the competition of the workers among themselves, i.e. upon their want of cohesion. And precisely because the unions direct themselves against the vital nerve of the present social order, however one-sidedly, in however narrow a way, are they so dangerous to this social order.<sup>2</sup>

The attempt to abolish competition among the

<sup>1</sup> Engels, *Condition of the Working Class in England*, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 218-19.

workers was clearly expressed in the aims of the early unions. Thus the initiation oaths of the Friendly Society of Coal Mining (1831) included the following : " I never will instruct any person into the art of coal mining . . . except to an obliged brother or brothers or an apprentice ; . . . I will never take any more work than I can do myself in one pay . . . ; I will never in a boasting manner make known how much money I get, or in how short a time." Rule XLIV of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (1834) read : " That every member of this Union do use his best endeavours . . . to induce his fellows to join the brotherhood, in order that no workmen may remain out of the Union to undersell them in the market of labour."

By the end of the eighteenth century trade unions had begun to take root, in the shape of local trade clubs which usually met in public-houses and bore a marked social character (liquor was an important item in the official expenditure). For the most part, these trade clubs had developed among the artisan " aristocracy," the skilled handicraftsmen whose methods of work and conditions the industrial revolution had yet left substantially untouched ; the compositors, coopers, carpenters and joiners, cabinetmakers, shipwrights, papermakers, and so forth. But from 1792 they had begun to spread among the key section of the new factory workers, the Lancashire cotton spinners ; and this potential threat to the rising capitalist employers, coupled with the panic induced among the ruling class by the French Revolution, set the stage for the hurried passage through Parliament in 1799-1800 of the notorious Combination Acts, with which the present outline may really begin.

The work of that famous statesman William Pitt and sanctimonious slave-emancipating Wilberforce,

aided by a contemporary Tory worthy named Sir John Anderson, these Acts, historians have said, "remain the most unqualified surrender of the State to the discretion of a class in the history of England." They "gave the masters unlimited power to reduce wages and make conditions more severe. They established the new industry on a basis of . . . serf labour and low wages."<sup>1</sup> Especially monstrous in this union-outlawing measure was a clause compelling defendants to give evidence against themselves and their associates; not less so the fact that, though the Acts were nominally directed equally against combinations of masters, no single case was recorded of their being so used, although they served to send thousands of workers to gaol. "Could an accurate account be given," wrote reformer Francis Place, "the gross injustice, the foul invective, and terrible punishments inflicted would not, after a few years have passed away, be credited on any but the best evidence." It was the "cruel . . . almost incredible" sentences passed on compositors of *The Times* in 1810 by the Common Serjeant of London, Sir John ("Bloody Black Jack") Sylvester, that induced Place to devote himself to securing the repeal of the Acts; though it was in the new textile industries that the weight of the Acts was chiefly felt, and the trade clubs of the artisans, especially in London, were half tolerated.

During the quarter of a century that this reign of anti-union terror lasted, trade unionism was really born. A wider unity, a more universal solidarity, began to supplant the parochial vision of the local trade club. Driven underground, the unions perforce became conspiratorial bodies, binding their members by oath, employing initiation ceremonies and the

<sup>1</sup> Hammond, *The Town Labourer*, pp. 113, 141.

whole ritual of the secret society. But these illegal unions, with a whole fifth column of police spies despatched from the Home Office to bring them to destruction, carried out the first series of widespread strikes, or "turnouts" as they were then generally called, in the new industries; outstanding among these strikes were those of the Scottish weavers (1812), the Lancashire spinners (1818), the miners on the North-East coast (1810), in Scotland (1818) and South Wales (1816); the last-named included the iron-workers, and succeeded in defeating a wage reduction. Interesting as a sample of the methods employed was the "brothering" of the North-East coast miners, "so named because the members of the union bound themselves by a most solemn oath to obey the orders of the brotherhood, under the penalty of being stabbed through the heart or of having their bowels ripped up."<sup>1</sup>

The advance of unity through these bitter years was seen in the emergence of the first complete national unions (for example, the Calicoprinters, the Ironfounders,<sup>2</sup> and the Papermakers), the national organisation of strike solidarity in a given trade (the Ropemakers), and the drawing together of different trades. The extant records show how these struggling unions were constantly assisting each other by strike donations; and the brilliant wire-pulling of Francis Place for the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824-5 would not have succeeded without the wide agitation conducted by the delegate bodies representing the different trades set up by the unions in London, Glasgow, Manchester and elsewhere. Of special importance were the London trades delegates, led by

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *History of Trade Unionism* (1920 ed.), p. 90.

<sup>2</sup> The Friendly Society of Ironfounders, founded 1809, is now fused in the National Union of Foundry Workers.

John Gast of Deptford, energetic secretary of the Shipwrights.

Repeal of the "partial and despotic" Combination Acts by no means gave full and unqualified freedom to trade unionism; but it was quite enough to open the floodgates. A Sheffield newspaper commented that the workers were overtaken by "a rage for union societies." National unions that survived to our own day were formed, like the Steam Engine Makers (1824) and the General Union of Carpenters and Joiners (1827).<sup>1</sup> A storm of strikes swept over the country, affecting alike the artisans and the factory workers. The London shipwrights and coopers engaged in stubborn battles, as did the Glasgow cotton operatives and the Bradford woolcombers. In 1826 Lancashire was convulsed by repeated strikes of cotton spinners and miners, seeking to resist the reductions that the employers were enforcing as a result of the severe slump that had followed the commercial crash of the previous year.

Those were stormy days, and strikes, especially in the coalfields, were civil wars in miniature, put down with every show of violence. Durham was in a turmoil in 1831-2, and marines and cavalry were drafted in to break the strikes and the union, led by the legendary Tommy Hepburn. Troops were also called upon to assist the great Welsh ironmasters in 1831, when they locked out all the members of the Union Club, first solid organisation of the miners and ironworkers; this was headed by "Dick Penderyn," also a legendary figure, who paid with his life on the gallows for his courageous leading of these Welsh trade unionists in insurrectionary battle, arms in hand, against their oppressors. When the suppres-

<sup>1</sup> Now part of the Amalgamated Engineering Union and the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers respectively.



sion of the Union Club made open unionism for a time impossible there emerged a secret terrorist body, calling themselves the Scotch Cattle (they used a bull's head and horns as a symbol), who attended to "traitors, turncoats and others" in the valleys of Wales and Monmouthshire. Nor was this an isolated example of the tyranny and terror of their capitalist masters driving trade unionists to reply with their own terror. That the Glasgow cotton-spinners, whose union had been formed secretly in 1816, organised the burning down of the mills of obnoxious employers and the killing of "knobsticks" (blacklegs) was revealed in the famous trial in 1838 of Thomas Hunter and four other leaders of the union.<sup>1</sup> Or, from a slightly different angle, we may cite the Manchester brickmakers' strike of 1843. In that strike one brickworks was stormed by strikers, armed with muskets, who fought a pitched battle with the armed guards of the employers. Though exposed to a heavy fire from an enemy under good cover the strikers did not give way until they had smashed up the works; then, their ammunition exhausted, they retired, still under arms and in good order, to Eccles, three miles from Manchester, though many of them were severely wounded.<sup>2</sup>

Talk about the "evil" of class hatred would have seemed absurd to the pioneers of trade unionism. "Hatred . . . of the general oppression by the dominant classes blazes out in the trade union records of the time."<sup>3</sup> Nor was this a blind, instinctive hate. It was realised that "in our present society" the worker "can save his manhood only in hatred

<sup>1</sup> Of Hunter and his comrades the Webbs tell how "the whole body of working class opinion was on their side, and the sentence of seven years' transportation was received with as much indignation as that upon the Dorchester labourers" (*op. cit.*, p. 170).

<sup>2</sup> Engels, *op. cit.*, pp. 226-7.      <sup>3</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 174.

and rebellion against the bourgeoisie"; and the "unions contribute greatly to nourish the bitter hatred of the workers against the property-holding class."<sup>1</sup> A contemporary militant put it thus, in a letter to one of the principal working-class papers of the day :

The great advantage of a strike is that it increases the enmity between labourers and capitalists, and compels workmen to reflect and investigate the causes of their sufferings. . . . The fruit of such reflections would be a violent hostility against the capitalist class ; and the new converts would be prepared to second the efforts of emancipation made by labourers in other quarters of England.<sup>2</sup>

Strikes, wrote Engels. "are the military school of the working-men, in which they prepare themselves for the great struggle which cannot be avoided. . . . As schools of war, the unions are unexcelled. In them is developed the peculiar courage of the English."<sup>3</sup>

The primary lesson taught in these "schools of war" was that to organise individual trades, to act sectionally, was not enough. The far-flung detachments of the working class needed to be embodied in one united army. From the *trade* union men sought to go further, to the *trades* union ; from the union of the workers in one trade to the union of the workers in many, or all, trades. It was the textile factory

<sup>1</sup> Engels, *op. cit.*, pp. 212, 219.

<sup>2</sup> *Poor Man's Guardian*, August 30th, 1934.

<sup>3</sup> Engels, p. 224. Engels added "that courage is required for a turnout, often indeed much loftier courage, much bolder, firmer determination than for an insurrection, is self-evident. . . . And precisely in this quiet perseverance, in this lasting determination which undergoes a hundred tests every day, the English working-man develops that side of his character which commands most respect. People who endure so much to break one single bourgeois will be able to break the power of the whole bourgeoisie."

workers who led in learning this lesson from the repeated failure of sectional strikes, however stubbornly fought. Arising out of the Lancashire spinners' strikes of 1818 and 1826 attempts were made to found a wider organisation, without lasting effect; though the first effort, despite the existence of the Combination Acts, brought together delegates of fourteen trades in Manchester who agreed to form a General Union of Trades, or Philanthropic Society (this title, and its picturesque alternative the Philanthropic Hercules, presumably intended as a legal cover), counting among its aims: "no trade to strike without informing and obtaining consent from the other trades"; and, despite its fleeting and uncertain existence, this body branched out to London, where John Gast was its chairman.<sup>1</sup>

The third attempt, made in 1830 following a particularly long and bitter strike of spinners in Ashton and Hyde, marked an important step forward. In that year was established the National Association for the Protection of Labour, led by John Doherty, outstanding trade union fighter of Lancashire, a talented writer and organiser; it was he who, in 1829, had been instrumental in forming the cotton spinners' first national organisation, the Grand General Union of the United Kingdom, at a widely attended and admirably publicised delegate conference in the Isle of Man. The National Association aimed at concerted resistance to wage-cuts; and it soon registered a total of 150 affiliated trade unions, mainly among textile workers in Lancashire and the

<sup>1</sup> The influence of these broadening conceptions of trade union unity in London was later seen in the establishment (in 1825) of the first general union organ, the *Trades Newspaper and Mechanics' Weekly Journal*, managed by a committee of eleven delegates from different London trades, over which Gast presided (Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 111).

Midlands; mechanics, miners, potters and other trades were likewise represented, and the affiliated membership is reported to have reached 100,000. But though the Association terrified the ruling class (on resigning, Home Secretary Sir Robert Peel left the job of smashing it as his principal legacy to his successor), it was in fact a loose federation, with small funds, and a limited and defensive policy. Its two years of life represented a big advance, but there were much bigger advances ahead.<sup>1</sup>

Meantime the country was in the throes of the parliamentary reform crisis, which, after bringing it to the brink of civil war, resulted in the passage of the Reform Act of 1832. The most far-seeing trade unionists had no illusions about the alliance between the workers and the middle class which won reform. (Francis Place records John Doherty telling him that the Reform Bill could bring no good to the working man, and that the people ought to compel the Government by force to do what was right.) To the mass, however, parliamentary reform appeared the panacea for their ills; in London, for instance, the National Union of the Working Classes and Others—a suitably symbolic title—had been formed in 1831 as the Metropolitan Trades Union, to which many unions affiliated. But the Reform Act speedily showed, since its sole beneficiaries were the middle class, the manufacturing capitalists, that the workers had been cannon fodder, not allies. The consequent dis-

<sup>1</sup> In defiance of the law the National Association first issued as its organ an unstamped weekly, the *United Trades Co-operative Journal*. When the authorities intervened, a legal stamped weekly, the *Voice of the People*, was started, with Doherty as editor. Though priced sevenpence this is said to have reached the immense circulation (for those days) of 30,000 copies a week. In addition to reports of the Association's activities, much space was given to political news, to the question of Irish freedom, and to news of revolutionary events abroad.

illusionment with "politics" (i.e. parliamentarism) brought revolutionary repercussions among the trade unions.

Already a new note had been struck with the foundation, at the height of the reform agitation, of the first national industrial union, transcending all craft divisions. This was the Operative Builders' Union, which rapidly gained the then remarkable membership of 40,000. In pursuit of its aim (cited above) "to advance and equalise the price of labour," it was soon conducting a whole series of determined strikes, notably in Lancashire and London. The masters replied with lockouts and the notorious "document," requiring their men to abjure trade unionism as a condition of employment.

Nor was this activity confined to the builders. There was a rising wave of strikes in other industries; the cotton-spinners in particular were on the move, planning a "universal strike" for an eight-hour working day, to date from March 1st, 1834. Into the midst of this upsurge there entered the great Utopian Socialist Robert Owen and his friends; and their propaganda for a new social order took the unions by storm. Owen intervened in two vital working-class conferences in the autumn of 1833. First came the congress of the Builders' Union (the "Builders' Parliament"), held at Manchester and attended by 500 delegates. Then at London, in October, delegates of trade unions and co-operatives gathered to discuss amalgamation. On both occasions close attention was paid to Owen's plea for ensuring a peaceful transition from capitalism to Socialism by transforming the unions into co-operative productive societies (the builders decided to form a productive guild), but it became clear that the general trend was social revolutionary.

Of the London congress James Morrison—a young and self-taught Socialist building worker who edited *The Pioneer*, weekly organ of the Builders' Union—wrote "the crisis of our condition is at hand—close upon us. The contest affects all alike; and woe unto the man who deserts his post. The question to be decided is, Shall Labour or Capital be uppermost?" The *Poor Man's Guardian* (October 19th, 1833) wrote that the reports of the delegates to the London congress "show that an entire change in society—a change amounting to a complete subversion of the existing 'order of the world'—is contemplated by the working classes. They aspire to be at the top instead of at the bottom of society—or rather that there should be no bottom or top at all!" The paper went on to contrast this revolutionary aim with the "paltry objects" of former trade unions, which "did not aim at any radical change; their tendency was not to alter the system, but rather to perpetuate it, by rendering it more tolerable"; and it spoke of the "silent but rapid progress of a grand national organisation which promises to embody the physical power of the country."

The return of the delegates from the London congress to their districts turned the mounting tide of trade unionism into a flood which swept the country from end to end in a manner beyond all precedent. No fewer than 800,000 workers were thus speedily organised, claimed Owen's paper, *The Crisis*. Evidently the "grand national organisation" of which the *Poor Man's Guardian* had spoken was casting its shadow before. That shadow was shortly to be given substance. In February 1834 union delegates again assembled in London and, meeting behind closed doors, finally constituted the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, the first, and

the greatest, example of the One Big Union. Its aim was expressed in its Rule XLVI :

Although the design of the Union is, in the first instance, to raise the wages of the workmen, or prevent any further reduction therein, and to diminish the hours of labour, the great and ultimate object of it must be to establish the paramount rights of Industry and Humanity, by . . . bringing about A DIFFERENT ORDER OF THINGS, in which the really useful and intelligent part of society only shall have the direction of its affairs.

In an astonishingly short time the G.N.C.T.U. counted a membership of half a million, enrolling adherents by scores of thousands in every branch of industry; the experience of two organisers visiting Hull, who made 1,000 members in a single evening, was typical; whole tracts that had hitherto been barren of trade union organisation suddenly proved fertile; agricultural labourers were organised *en masse*, in the English counties, in Scotland (where the Perthshire ploughmen and the Dundee shearmen were reported as forming unions), and in the then rural suburbs of London; women workers were drawn in in large numbers—Rule XX providing specifically that “Lodges of Industrious Females shall be instituted”; non-manual workers even swelled the surging throng, the Grand National issuing a special appeal “to the Shopmen, Clerks, Porters and other industrious non-producers.”

Scarcely had the Grand National assumed concrete shape than it was involved in a flood of strikes and lockouts all over the country on questions of wages, hours and the right to union membership. Chief among these were the strikes of the hosiers in Leicester, of engineers, calico-printers and cabinet-makers in Glasgow, of tailors in London. Specially

important, too, was the lockout of builders in the metropolis, arising from a dispute as to the beer Cubitt's men were to have on the job (they refused non-union liquor), and marked again by the presentation of the "document." Nation-wide attention centred on a long-drawn lockout of 1,500 men, women and children at Derby for refusing to give up the union. The cotton-spinners' movement flared up in a remarkable popular uprising at Oldham, where every mill struck and stormy demonstrations demanding the eight-hour day, in which women played a prominent part,<sup>1</sup> were accompanied by fierce fights with the police.

These events induced panic among the ruling class,<sup>2</sup> who found their own dictatorship confronted by the potentially dictatorial power of the working class. As James Morrison had written :

The growing power and growing intelligence of trades unions, when properly managed, will draw into its vortex all the commercial interests of the country and, in so doing, it will become, by its own self-acquired importance, a most influential, we might almost say dictatorial part of the body politic.<sup>3</sup>

Accordingly the authorities struck hard, and at the weakest link in the G.N.C.T.U. chain, the organisation of the agricultural labourers. In Dorset, where conditions were specially bad, two brothers in the village of Tolpuddle, George and James Loveless, had got in touch with the Grand National and were forming a Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers, employing

<sup>1</sup> Reports in *The Times* mentioned the activity of the Lodge of Female Gardeners and the Lodge of Ancient Virgins, which may very well have been "Lodges of Industrious Females" of the G.N.C.T.U.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Arnold, the "enlightened" educational reformer and headmaster of Rugby, wrote to a friend at this time : "you have heard, I doubt not, of the Trades Unions ; a fearful engine of mischief, ready to riot or to assassinate ; and I see no counteracting power."

<sup>3</sup> *The Pioneer*, May 31st, 1884.



the customary initiation ceremonies and oaths. The Lovelesses and four others were hastily framed on a preposterous charge of administering illegal oaths (under a special Act of 1797 passed in connection with the Mutiny at the Nore), haled before the Dorchester Assizes and, after an entirely monstrous trial, sentenced to seven years' transportation.

This famous case of the Tolpuddle Martyrs produced an instant protest campaign of nation-wide dimensions, in which the Grand National was warmly seconded by important unions in the north which remained outside its ranks; over a quarter of a million signatures were obtained to a petition for the release of the Tolpuddle men, and the agitation culminated in London's first monster working-class demonstration. Despite formidable police and military preparations between 100,000 and 200,000 demonstrators, representing every trade, each marshalled behind thirty-three different banners, marched to Copenhagen Fields, a piece of open land then existing near King's Cross. The building trades struck work to take part.

But while the G.N.C.T.U. could thus successfully conduct an impressive protest campaign (which led eventually to the release of the Tolpuddle Martyrs), it proved unable to accomplish the more positive tasks of leadership to achieve the "different order of things." It was the first great example of what we nowadays call Syndicalism, the belief that trade union action alone can overthrow capitalism, employing the general strike—or "national holiday" as it was then termed—as a peaceful, passive resistance weapon; "this inert conspiracy of the poor against the rich," said a Scottish working-class paper.<sup>1</sup> Even from this standpoint the Owenite Executive of the Grand

<sup>1</sup> *Glasgow Liberator : Trades Union Gazette*, February 1st, 1834.

National, faced with the torrent of sectional disputes described, failed to ride the whirlwind and direct the storm. A public statement was issued deprecating all industrial disputes, and sanction for strikes was refused (as in the case of the London shoemakers, who thereupon voted to secede from the G.N.C.T.U. and struck on their own). Such a policy inevitably induced the rapid disintegration of the union, which did not outlast the year.

The passing of this revolutionary-aimed mass unionism—and there was to be no further organisation of the unskilled labouring mass for nearly half a century—left its mark, notably in the building trades. But the following great stage in working-class development, the revolutionary political movement of Chartism (1837-48), was not of a trade union character, though many trade unionists played an active part in it. The story of the fight for the People's Charter falls outside the scope of this study.<sup>1</sup> Here it must suffice to say that the shock troops of Chartism were the textile factory workers and the miners; the unions of the former favoured by overwhelming majorities the turning of the Lancashire General Strike of 1842 into a political rising for the Charter; while Chartists played a leading part in the formation of the first national coalfields organisation, the Miners' Association, in 1841. But Chartism tackled too late the vital problem of rooting itself firmly in the relatively strong craft unions, the "pompous trades and proud mechanics" as Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor called them.

The strike of 1842 was Chartism's highest point, save for its final burst in Europe's revolutionary year 1848. Thereafter the trade union development which

<sup>1</sup> The best introduction is Salme A. Dutt's *When England Arose* (Key Books No. 6).

took place diverged more and more from any aiming at radical change. Union development in the mid-forties was important, too. The Miners' Association reported a membership of 100,000 in 1844, and made the coalfields ring by its employment of a brilliant Chartist solicitor, W. P. Roberts, to fight the tyranny of local magistrates and truck firms. In that year, too, the five-months' strike of the Durham miners was at once the most sensational and the most heroic struggle that the coalfields of this country had yet seen. It was fought with the utmost brutality on the part of the owners; in the course of it every one of the 40,000 strikers was evicted "with revolting cruelty. The sick, the feeble, old men and little children, even women in childbirth, were mercilessly turned from their beds and cast into the roadside ditches";<sup>1</sup> and the reigning Lord Londonderry, leading coalowner, issued a notorious manifesto denouncing "the senseless warfare of the pitmen against *their proprietors and masters*."

During the same period union organisation was revived and strengthened among the potters and the cotton-spinners (1843), while the compositors amalgamated their local unions into the National Typographical Society (1845).<sup>2</sup> In that last year, too, there was formed a new general organisation, the National Association of United Trades. From this the larger unions tended to hold aloof, and it became a rallying centre for the smaller and less well-organised trades. Not setting up to be more than a strictly federal body, the Association also specifically eschewed the revolutionary aims of the Grand National, stressing

<sup>1</sup> Engels, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

<sup>2</sup> This national union only survived for a couple of years, then dividing into the metropolitan and provincial unions that we have to-day (the London Society of Compositors and the Typographical Association):

instead "the importance of, and beneficial tendency arising from, a good understanding between the employer and the employed."<sup>1</sup> Clearly the tendency "not to alter the system, but rather to perpetuate it, by rendering it more tolerable" (so denounced by the *Poor Man's Guardian* a dozen years before) was again in the ascendant.

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

## PERIOD II

### CHAPTER 2 : " DEFENCE NOT DEFIANCE " (1850-80)

THIS mid-Victorian period of trade unionism was essentially that of the definitive national organisation of the " pompous trades and proud mechanics," the skilled minority of the working class. " Defence not defiance " became the union motto—to defend the vested interest of the craftsman, not to defy the employing class with the organised might of the whole working class ; similarly the line " a fair day's wage for a fair day's work " implied the full acceptance of the existing order, subject to specific and limited reform, to getting the best that could be got within its framework.

There was nothing accidental about this development. By the end of the 'forties British capitalism had been able to break down all barriers to its full growth. The triumph of Free Trade meant complete freedom for capital. There was industrial and commercial expansion on an unparalleled scale, " leaping and bounding " (in Gladstonian phrase), returning profits not of tens but thousands per cent.,<sup>1</sup> confirming Britain, the " workshop of the world," in its privileged position of industrial monopoly. Thus it was both possible and necessary for substantial concessions to be made to the two main groups upon whom this prosperity depended, the textile factory workers

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation*, p. 81.

(who were greatly benefited by the Ten Hour Act of 1847) and the skilled artisans in the metal-working and building trades. The consolidation in this way of an “ aristocracy of labour ” over and above the main mass of the working class was fully reflected in the new character of trade unionism.

First of the “ new model ” was the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, established in 1851 after some years of gradual getting together of the numerous small and mostly local craft societies in the industry. These coalesced around the largest among them, the Journeymen Steam-Engine, Machine-Makers and Millwrights Friendly Society (an 1826 foundation), two of whose prominent members, William Newton and William Allan, were the principal protagonists of amalgamation. Allan, a Crewe railway shopman, became the first secretary of the A.S.E., bequeathing to that body its tradition of cautious administration and almost miserly care for its funds.

This new “ Amalgamated ” unionism—the name became a programme—marked a decisive break from the “ schools of war ” described by Engels. For the old militancy it substituted the policy of co-operation with the employers, asking no more for the working man than “ a fair and legitimate share of the profits of his toil.”<sup>1</sup> Strikes were frowned upon. The funds that were accumulated from high contributions were employed to finance a wide series of provident benefits, and the amalgamated unions functioned substantially as trade friendly societies. The A.S.E. figures afford a typical picture; from 1851-89 these showed that while the union’s expenditure on the various friendly benefits (sick, funeral, out-of-work, superannuation,

<sup>1</sup> A phrase from a pamphlet by William Graham, a stonemason, published in 1868; quoted in Rothstein, *From Chartism to Labourism*, p. 200.

etc.) was £2,987,998, on strikes it was only £86,664.<sup>1</sup>

As a natural accompaniment of this, the loose structure of the old fighting unions, with the wide autonomy enjoyed by the local lodges, was changed for the elaborately centralised structure of a business organisation. Thus decisive power now resided in the national executive body and, by the same token, effective authority was placed more and more in the hands of the permanent officials, the head office administrators required by the "new model" unionism, whose emergence as a regular corps set apart from their members was a fact of first-rate importance. First symptom of this was the informal and influential London grouping of union general secretaries, christened "the Junta," by the Webbs, which included Allan (Engineers), Robert Applegarth (Carpenters and Joiners), Daniel Guile (Ironfounders), Edwin Coulson (Bricklayers) and George Odger (Ladies' Shoemakers).<sup>2</sup>

It must not be supposed that this period was free from strikes. Quite the contrary; and it was remarkable for the growing use by the employers of the lock-out, found a convenient instrument for "solving" problems of over-production. When it was but a year old the A.S.E., fighting against overtime and piece-work, was involved in a lockout of engineers in London and Lancashire, which ended with the employers reviving the hated "document"; this, however, the men signed only under duress and did not abandon the union.

The principal issue of the disputes of this time was

<sup>1</sup> George Howell, *Trade Unionism New and Old* (1900 ed.), pp. 126-7.

<sup>2</sup> Odger was not a general secretary, and his union was a small, old-fashioned local craft union; he was a notable figure for his general activity in London, both as a trade unionist and as a Radical politician.

the shorter working day—nine hours instead of ten. A Nine Hours Movement developed in the building trades over a period of years ; it came to a head in the lengthy London strike and lockout of 1859-60, when the employers were defeated in their attempt to enforce the “ document,” though the shorter hours were not then won. This dispute was noteworthy for the solidarity shown by unions outside the building trade (the A.S.E. created an immense sensation by three separate weekly donations of £1,000 each) and for its sequel in the establishment of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners. Formed directly on the engineers’ model, this shortly became, under its secretary, Robert Applegarth, second only to the A.S.E. itself in membership and funds.

Nor did the Nine Hours Movement stop there. In 1871 the engineers on the north-east coast embarked on a five months’ strike which, despite the apathy of their national executive, not only won the nine-hour day for the district but gave powerful impetus for its successful achievement in other places and other trades. It was significant that organisation in the north-east was at a very low level when the strike began, and the success was due to the uniting of the various trades, unionists and non-unionists alike, around an *ad hoc* body, the Nine Hours League, led by John Burnett, a local A.S.E. militant who in 1874 succeeded Allan as general secretary.

Shorter hours were also the concern of the cotton factory workers and the miners. In the 'fifties the Lancashire cotton operatives began to form their present craft “ Amalgamations,” or federations of local craft unions (spinners, weavers, etc.). To interpret the immensely complicated piece price-lists which came to govern cotton wages, there grew up an extraordinary mandarinat of union officials,



appointed by competitive examination for their mathematico-technical ingenuity and as willing to serve the employers as they were their own members.<sup>1</sup> In the 'seventies a strong movement for a nine-hour day developed and secured the compromise of a 56½-hour week. As for the coalfields, where the powerful Miners' Association had faded out in the early 'fifties, organisation picked up with the formation in 1868 of the National Miners' Union, led by Alexander Macdonald, a remarkable Scottish ex-miner turned successful business man who in 1874 was elected (together with Thomas Burt of Northumberland) one of the first two Liberal-Labour M.P.s. There were constant struggles over the right to appoint checkweighers, partially conceded in the Mines Act of 1860. Throughout the 'sixties there was a series of miners' strikes and lockouts, the latter being an especial fancy of the Yorkshire coalowners; and in North Wales in 1869 four persons were killed, twenty-six wounded when the troops fired on a crowd of demonstrating miners. As a rival to the National Union an Amalgamated Association of Miners was formed in Lancashire, spreading to South Wales and the Midlands. Between the two some 200,000 miners were organised. Through the National Union in particular the demand for an eight-hour day underground was voiced; in one coalfield (Fife) the direct action of the men secured this.

Though amalgamated unionism eschewed political independence and sought co-operation with the employers, it nevertheless engaged in important battles with the governing class and the State on certain broad democratic issues. First came the fight for freedom of organisation, for the unfettered legal status of trade unions, which the Acts of 1824-5 had not

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, p. 479.

positively secured. Unions still had no legal protection for their funds, strikers could still be (and were) gaoled for “ conspiracy ” and “ intimidation,” the Master and Servant Act was rigorously applied.<sup>1</sup> Some incidents in Sheffield (where the local trade clubs of the cutlery crafts went in for “ rattening ”—a hangover of the old tradition of terrorising blacklegs) were made the excuse for the appointment of a Royal Commission on trade unions in 1867, and stiffer anti-union legislation was feared. Allan, Applegarth and their friends thereupon established the Conference of Amalgamated Trades (in effect a committee of themselves) and set to work to influence the Commission.

At this point the second fight, for extension of the franchise, showed its importance. The Reform Act of 1867, which gave the vote to the workers in the towns, was the result of a wide agitation by the National Reform League, a body inspired by the First International (see below) and largely influenced by Marx himself.<sup>2</sup> Trade unionists were the shock troops of the League, as in the famous battle of Hyde Park in 1866, when a crowd of 200,000 broke the railings down and the Guards were called out, or in the many demonstrations where union banners led the way, the Carpenters bearing the slogan : “ Deal With Us on the Square. You Have Chiselled Us Long Enough.”

With the trade unionists enfranchised, some concessions had to be made ; but while the Trade Union Act which emerged in 1871, after much ministerial shuffling, improved the juridical status of the unions, new and severe legal blows were struck at all normal

<sup>1</sup> This monstrous piece of class legislation made breach of contract by a worker a criminal offence, punishable by imprisonment up to three months, whereas a defaulting employer committed only a civil offence, punishable by a small fine.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Marx, *Letters to Kugelmann*, pp. 38, 40.

strike activity, like picketing (so that, to give one out of many cases, a group of women in South Wales were gaoled simply for saying "bah" to a blackleg). Five more years of struggle were necessary, together with the decisive intervention of the trade union vote against the Government in the General Election of 1874, before an acceptable amending Act was finally passed in 1876.

The third fight was on the international field, for solidarity with democratic movements abroad, and against reactionary intervention—or "non-intervention"—by Britain. By impressive mass meetings British trade unionists demonstrated their support for the North in the American Civil War, despite the desolation of Lancashire by the cotton famine resulting from the Northern blockade. The national struggles of the Polish and Italian peoples also had full backing; when Garibaldi visited London he received a tremendous popular welcome, and many trade unionists played a prominent part in the National League for the Independence of Poland. From these quarters came active participation in the historic International Workingmen's Association when it was founded in London under Marx's direct leadership. Many unions and their branches affiliated to the International, and union leaders, like Applegarth, sat for a time on its General Council, of which George Odger was the first president. The International was heartily endorsed by the Trades Union Congress at its second meeting, in Birmingham, in 1869; and it played a highly practical part in stopping the import of foreign blacklegs, notably in the engineers' nine-hours strike already mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For the First International see *Founding of the First International* (a collection of documents), and also Lozovsky, *Marx and the Trade Unions*, especially Chaps. IV and V.

Arising out of these varied struggles there came the first permanent grouping of trade unions, first on a local and then on a national scale. The 'sixties saw the establishment and consolidation of Trades Councils in the principal cities, the London Council being a by-product of the building dispute of 1859-60. In London the Amalgamated leaders were especially strong and the Trades Council was the scene of a bitter feud between them and the leading representative of the old, aggressive but anarchic local trade unionism, George Potter, whom they denounced as a “strike-jobber.” Potter, a thorough demagogue, had his importance through his founding and editing of *The Beehive*, the leading trade union weekly of the time, which was for a while the organ of the First International.

The problem of the unions' legal position, and the threat of the Royal Commission, led the Manchester and Salford Trades Council in 1868 to summon a national conference of trade unions and trades councils; this was the first regular Trades Union Congress which, through the Parliamentary Committee that it shortly set up, led the final stages of the fight for union legalisation. Precursors of the T.U.C. were national trade union conferences called in the middle 'sixties by the Glasgow and Sheffield Trades Councils and in London by George Potter.

Though trade unionism had thus, over a score of years, registered substantial advances, the narrow craft outlook of the “new model” clearly bore within itself the elements of grave weakness. This had begun to be evident even when the boom years of the early 'seventies saw a sudden union upsurge which pushed the T.U.C. affiliations up from 375,000 to nearly 1,200,000 and reached out to the unskilled, notably the agricultural labourers. But the remarkable

organisation in 1872-3, under the leadership of Joseph Arch, a Warwickshire farm labourer and lay preacher, of a union totalling 100,000 members, which battled valiantly against squire and parson, did not seriously survive the heavy agricultural depression that soon set in. Nor were the craftsmen likely to be held in difficult days to unions in all of which, say the Webbs, there was "the same abandonment by the Central Executive of any dominant principle of trade policy, the same absence of initiative in trade movements, and the same more or less persistent struggle to check the trade activity of its branches."<sup>1</sup>

The narrow particularism of the Amalgamated unions was breeding new disunity. The pattern-makers seceded from the A.S.E. in 1872 and throughout the metal-working trades many new craft unions sprang up. Unedifying and demoralising demarcation disputes between unions multiplied. A break in trade in the mid 'seventies brought a series of bitterly fought but uniformly defeated strikes, notably among the South Wales miners, who were forced to accept the sliding scale payment of wages (1875), the stonemasons (1877), the Clyde shipwrights and the Lancashire cotton operatives (1878). The last-named strike was over the characteristic issue of over-production, the employers demanding a wage reduction and the operatives proposing short time; a curiously unreal difference for a dispute which had its violent moments, including the burning down of the house of the employers' president.

Just at this moment Frederick Engels was writing that "the British Labour movement is to-day and for many years has been working in a narrow circle of strikes" which "cannot lead the movement one step further," since they "are looked upon not as an

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 819.

expedient and not as a means of propaganda but as an ultimate aim.” The exclusion of political activity by the unions, he added, meant that there was no general working-class movement in the continental sense.<sup>1</sup> The slump of 1878-9, worst hitherto known in British industry, signalling that the epoch of Britain’s privilege and industrial monopoly was at its end, brought a crisis of trade unionism which gave Engels’ words new meaning.

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Edward Bernstein, June 17th, 1878.

## PERIOD III

### CHAPTER 3: THE NEW UNIONISM (1880-1900)

THE crisis of trade unionism in the 'eighties was one aspect of the deep social crisis brought about by the ending of Britain's industrial monopoly, the dethroning of "the despot of the world market." Unbroken stagnation in the major branches of industry, poverty so widespread and grinding that a leading capitalist apologist—Sir Robert Giffen—was compelled to exclaim "no one can contemplate the present condition of the masses without desiring something like a revolution for the better," brought a breaking of the ties that had bound the working class to their masters. Socialism was re-born in Britain and the working-class movement as we know it took shape.

Amalgamated unionism was now absolutely moribund. Not only did it abandon all pretence of defending the standards of its members; not only was it becoming, in the Webbs' phrase, "nothing more than a somewhat stagnant department of the Friendly Society movement"; benefits were being reduced, contributions raised and many members deprived of benefit altogether. And what was the way out? Already in 1881 Engels had publicly pointed out<sup>1</sup> that with the waning of Britain's industrial monopoly the unions could not maintain their

<sup>1</sup> In the *Labour Standard*, organ of the London Trades Council: a remarkable series collected in Engels, *The British Labour Movement*.

organised strength “ unless they really march in the van of the working class ” ; and this meant breaking the “ vicious circle out of which there is no issue ” (of movements limited to wages and hours), ceasing to be the “ tail of the ‘ Great Liberal Party,’ ” building out of the unions a working-men’s party, “ a political organisation of the working class as a whole,” which would win power for the workers and build a new social order.

As for the dominant leaders—the “ old gang ” as they came to be called—this appeal fell on deaf ears. Bound hand and foot to Gladstonian liberalism and middle-class orthodoxy, the men who had succeeded the Junta offered the movement not leadership but abdication. They dominated the Trades Union Congress, of which Henry Broadhurst (Stonemasons) was secretary, and men like John Burnett (Engineers), J. D. Prior (Carpenters), George Shipton (London Trades Council) leading lights ; and the whole policy of the T.U.C. in those days has been summed up in two words—“ contemptuous inactivity.”<sup>1</sup> Added to which there was the point, made by Socialist pioneers like William Morris, that the unions

now no longer represent the whole class of workers as working *men* but rather are charged with the office of keeping the human part of the capitalists’ machinery in good working order and freeing it from any grit of discontent.<sup>2</sup>

It was the Socialists, both the intellectual leaders outside the unions and the younger trade unionists who became converts, who led the fight against the “ old gang ” and revolutionised trade unionism. There was a vast difference, however, between the criticism of the limited, negative character of the old unions, and the reactionary, often corrupt character

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 399.    <sup>2</sup> *Lecture on Socialism*, 1885.



of their leaders, offered by Engels or by Socialist trade unionists like Tom Mann and John Burns of the Engineers, and that coming from the Socialist organisation then first in the field, the Social Democratic Federation. In the one case criticism was positive, taking account of the revolutionary potentialities of trade unionism ; in the other it was negative, dogmatic and sectarian, reflecting the middle-class outlook of the Federation's pseudo-Marxist and dictatorial leader H. M. Hyndman, and so " antagonised trade unionists without drawing over any considerable percentage to the Socialist position."<sup>1</sup> We shall suggest below the serious effects that this sectarianism had on the future of the movement.

The T.U.C. was the battleground for the " old gang " and their challengers, first representative of the latter being a young miners' delegate from Ayrshire, Keir Hardie. The polemic, both at Congresses and in the press, was couched in the most bitter and personal terms. At the Dundee Congress of 1889 a climax was reached. Broadhurst hit out in a fashion that will be familiar to a generation accustomed to the anti-left outbursts of Mr. Bevin or Sir Walter Citrine. He capped earlier sneers at Hardie (" he was not aware that Mr. Hardie had made sacrifices in this great Labour movement "), who had attacked his association with Brunner,<sup>2</sup> a great liberal capitalist long notorious for the scandalous exploitation in his chemical works, by denouncing

those who spread dissensions in the unions and seek to destroy unionism by vehemently attacking its prominent

<sup>1</sup> *Tom Mann's Memoirs*, p. 57. For a detailed account of the Socialist developments in the 'eighties, and a documented criticism of S.D.F. sectarianism, see Hutt, *This Final Crisis*, Pt. II, Chap. III, " The Re-birth of Socialism."

<sup>2</sup> Of Brunner, Mond & Co., forerunners of the modern Imperial Chemical Industries Ltd.

representatives. . . . Their emissaries enter our camp in the guise of friends, in order that they may the better sow the seeds of disruption. Let the workers beware of them!

and concluded with the cry "hound these creatures from our midst." The "old gang" was rewarded with an overwhelming vote of Congress; but they were in fact on the eve of defeat.

There had already been signs that new forces were on the move. In July, 1888, a Socialist-led strike of the girls at Bryant and May's match factory in the East End secured wide publicity, alike for the shocking conditions that it exposed and for the revelation of the number of Liberal politicians who were concerned as shareholders. The strike was successful. It was the "light jostle needed for the entire avalanche to move" (Engels). The gas-workers followed. Unrest had been growing for some time at Beckton, where the stokers worked a twelve-hour shift and a thirteen-day fortnight. They demanded an eight-hour shift, a twelve-day fortnight and a shilling a shift wage increase. Led by Will Thorne, a Beckton stoker, the men vainly sought Liberal aid to have their case raised in Parliament, and then turned to the Socialists. They were advised to organise a union and given every assistance, notably by Eleanor Marx (Karl's most talented daughter) and her husband Edward Aveling.<sup>1</sup> Rapid recruitment to the new Gasworkers' and General Labourers' Union enabled the men shortly to hand in strike

<sup>1</sup> The Avelings, who worked in intimate association with, and under the guidance of, Engels, had already been working hard at propaganda among the Radical working-men's clubs, particularly in the East End, out of which had come, after the "Bloody Sunday" battle in Trafalgar Square in 1887, the Law and Liberty League, uniting Socialist and Radical working men and trade unionists in a broad mass movement (Hutt, *This Final Crisis*, pp. 106-12).

notices ; and they were in so strong a position that the Gas Companies conceded the whole of their demands, save that the wage increase granted was sixpence a shift instead of a shilling.

Within a few days of this striking success the "stagnant pool of misery" that was London's waterfront was in violent agitation. A spontaneous strike of the men at the South-West India Dock, provoked by a dispute over the amount of extra pay due on a certain cargo, became within a week a general dockers' strike. The world was electrified by a movement that completely paralysed its greatest port. Under the leadership of Socialists—John Burns, Tom Mann, Ben Tillett, with Eleanor Marx as secretary of the strike committee—the starvelings had truly arisen from their slumbers. Among the principal demands were a minimum wage of sixpence an hour (the "dockers' tanner"), extra pay for overtime, a minimum engagement of four hours. The strike lasted for over four weeks, sustained by an unprecedented wave of international solidarity ; of the £48,000 odd subscribed to the strike funds, no less than £30,000 was telegraphed from Australia. Self-appointed mediation efforts by Cardinal Manning and Lord Buxton (the Liberal politician who had refused to help the gasmen) balked the dockers of their full demands ; but they won their tanner, and their success brought the unskilled masses into organisation in a way unparalleled since the apocalyptic days of 1834.

The following year saw over 200,000 supposedly unorganisable labourers brought into the ranks of trade unionism, which was transformed in the process.

These unskilled (wrote Engels) are very different chaps from the fossilised brothers of the old trade unions ; not a trace of the old formalist spirit, of the

craft exclusiveness of the engineers for instance ; on the contrary, a general cry for the organisation of *all* trade unions in one fraternity and for a direct struggle against capital.<sup>1</sup>

The Dockers' Union that was formed out of the strike extended from London to the other principal ports. The Gasworkers organised general labourers throughout the provinces, soon reporting a membership of 70,000 in no fewer than seventy trades. On the railways, one of the blackest spots for exploitation and lack of organisation, the General Railway Workers' Union arose to challenge and reinforce the hitherto feeble Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants ; its proclamation " that the union shall remain a fighting one, and shall not be encumbered with any sick or accident fund " was typical of the spirit of the New Unionism.<sup>2</sup> The Sailors' and Firemen's Union, founded in 1887, registered 65,000 members two years later. Organisation spread apace in the coalfields, where the Miners' Federation (formed in 1888 with an affiliated membership of only 86,000) was soon to pass the 200,000 mark, emerging as the permanent mass organisation of the country's mineworkers. With the willing aid of the new movement in the towns, unionism was revived in the countryside, the remnant of Joseph Arch's union picking up strength and new unions being formed,

<sup>1</sup> Letter to Hermann Schlueter, January 11th, 1890 : Marx-Engels, *Correspondence* (edited by Dona Torr), p. 463.

<sup>2</sup> In 1890 the A.S.R.S. was galvanised into launching its first aggressive campaign, against the appalling hours of labour then prevalent on railways. It donated £6,000 to the separate Scottish Society of Railway Servants, which conducted an unsuccessful strike for a shorter working day at Christmas of that year and was later merged in the A.S.R.S. An attempt at mass victimisation on the old London and North-Western Railway in 1896 was defeated by the union. Its membership doubled and next year it initiated the first " all grades " movement for general improvements which, however, was stonewalled by the companies.

notably in the eastern counties. In the arrogant and exclusive London printing trade the despised and disregarded machine-room labourers formed a Printers' Labourers' Union, later to grow into the formidable national body we know as Natsopa. Nor were these developments without their effect on the old craft unions, whose decline in membership was sharply reversed, a doubling or trebling of the pre-1889 figures being recorded in some cases. The old exclusiveness also began to break down; in 1892 the A.S.E. itself revised its rules so as to open its ranks to virtually all grades of engineering mechanics. It was significant of the new solidarity that between 1889-1891 over sixty new Trades Councils were established.

The New Unionism fought its first battle within the general movement over the legal eight-hour day. This had for some time been a main point of contention between the Socialists and the "old gang" in the T.U.C., and union opinion was steadily veering in its favour. It had been proclaimed a primary slogan by the Paris Congress of 1889 which reconstituted the International,<sup>1</sup> and was the rallying cry which made London's first May Day (in 1890), when 200,000 demonstrated to Hyde Park, an impressive manifestation of the power of the New Unionism. This was a particular triumph for the Marxist leadership of the Gasworkers (of which Eleanor Marx was bluntly described by Engels as "the boss," and whose rules were the work of Edward Aveling); and this union was the centre of the Legal Eight Hour Day and International Labour League, established as a follow-up of the May Day success with a view to the eventual organisation of an independent Workers' Party on the broadest possible basis. It

<sup>1</sup> Commonly called the Second International, which broke up with the war of 1914.

may be noted here that a new and keen internationalism was a vital feature of the time ; once again the Gasworkers were to the fore, as their early records bear witness, and the report on Britain that they, together with the Eight Hour League, presented to the Brussels International Congress in 1891 (it was drafted by the Avelings), was "generally admitted," said Will Thorne, "to be one of the best and most valuable presented to the Congress."<sup>1</sup>

When the Trades Union Congress came round, in September, 1890, at Liverpool, the "old gang" had their backs to the wall. John Burns and Tom Mann were present as delegates from the haughty A.S.E., which had furthermore mandated them to vote for the legal eight-hour day. After a vehement debate the resolution on this point was adopted by 193 votes to 155 and Broadhurst, in dudgeon, resigned the Congress secretaryship. The two following Congresses substantially confirmed the Socialist victory on this issue and the Norwich Congress in 1894 adopted by 219 votes to 61, on the motion of Keir Hardie, a complete nationalisation resolution.

Naturally the challenge of the New Unionism was not taken lying down by the employers. They rallied their own forces and sought means of striking back. A new dockers' strike in 1893 against the employers' "free labour registries" was defeated. The engineering employers federated and in 1897, after a long and bitter lockout, forced upon the A.S.E. their claim to be absolute masters in their own works. In two

<sup>1</sup> *Third Yearly Report and Balance Sheet of the National Union of Gasworkers and General Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland* (1892), pp. 5-6. For access to the unique file of the Gasworkers' early reports now in the possession of the original union's lineal successor, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, I am indebted to the good offices of Mr. Thorne himself and Mr. Adams, of the N.U.G.M.W. head office.

of the biggest miners' strikes of the period, that of the Federated area in 1893 and South Wales in 1898, troops were called out at the request of the coal-owners; on the first occasion striking miners were fired on at Featherstone in Yorkshire, and several killed. The South Wales strike was directed against the sliding scale, which it succeeded in killing, and also resulted in the establishment of the South Wales Miners' Federation. On the other hand the gearing of wages to profits (together with detailed conciliation machinery) was applied to the Lancashire cotton trade in the famous Brooklands agreement which terminated the spinners' strike of 1898.

A number of influential employers combined to form the Employers' Parliamentary Council, a bitterly anti-union body, which subsidised an imitation Pinkerton strike-breaking agency called the Free Labour Association, headed by a renegade trade unionist and adventurer named William Collison. The Council also campaigned for the promotion of new anti-union legislation. It was well seconded by the Courts, which began to hand down decisions in cases affecting the rights of picketing or boycott of non-union firms that made the whole apparently secure legal status of the unions look extremely uncertain and hazardous by the late 'nineties.

In this developing situation it was a major disaster that there was a divorce between the New Unionism and Socialism (that is, revolutionary Socialism). For this the main responsibility fell to the sectarian S.D.F., which had misunderstood and attacked the New Unionism from the start; "it insisted upon John Burns unfurling the Red Flag in the dock strike, where such an act would have ruined the whole movement, and instead of gaining over the dockers,

would have driven them back into the arms of the capitalists.”<sup>1</sup> The S.D.F. likewise refused to enter the all-embracing workers’ party which the leading advanced trade unionists established in 1893 in the shape of the Independent Labour Party; consequently the I.L.P. soon veered to the opposite error, of unsure opportunism, which could welcome a Liberal like James Ramsay MacDonald, who carefully explained that his change-over from Liberalism to the I.L.P. meant no change in his political objects !

Of especial significance for the future was the year 1895. It marked the peak to date of the strikes against non-unionism which were becoming a feature. It witnessed the death of Frederick Engels, presaging the tragedy of the Avelings and the suicide of Eleanor Marx three years later, which shattered the little Marxist leading group. It saw the first large-scale General Election effort by Socialist candidates, the I.L.P. putting up 28 and the S.D.F. 5; all were defeated, including Keir Hardie in West Ham, which he had won three years before. Following this political setback for the Socialist-New Unionist forces reactionary elements in the T.U.C. plucked up courage and at the Cardiff Congress were able to put through a series of menacing measures. The Trades Councils, which had fathered the T.U.C. in the 'sixties, as we have seen, were excluded. The card vote was introduced for the first time. Those who were not union officials or working at their trade were declared ineligible as delegates (a blow at Hardie, Burns, etc.). The effect of this was seen in the defeat of Ben Tillett for re-election to the Parliamentary Committee and the rejection of a nationalisation resolution by 607,000 to 186,000 on a card vote; the reactionary trend continued, and at the Birming-

<sup>1</sup> Engels in an interview with the *Daily Chronicle*, July 1st, 1893.



ham Congress in 1897 an invitation to an international trade union congress was rejected by 317,000 votes to 282,000.<sup>1</sup> Some of the new unions underwent significant internal changes. Thus a French observer wrote of the Dockers that "the original militant character of the union has been modified. . . . Strike pay plays but a small part and its amount is not even determined. On the other hand the funeral benefit . . . is the subject of detailed regulations."<sup>2</sup>

These were years in which the increase in income from foreign investments, the growth of imperialism, was proceeding by giant strides; the new colonial monopoly was coming to replace the vanished industrial monopoly and enabling the ruling class to continue in a different form the policy of concessions to special sections of the working class. Real wages were rising up to the turn of the century. Nevertheless the trade unions were feeling their way towards the independent political movement which the developing employers' attack upon them was rendering essential.

<sup>1</sup> Of one effort by the T.U.C. at this time much was expected in some quarters but nothing came. That was the establishment in 1899, following the severe financial strain of the engineers' lockout two years before, of the General Federation of Trade Unions. This body was designed essentially as a mutual insurance society and functioned as such, despite the vague hopes that it might become a real trade union centre and directing authority, which the T.U.C. was not. For some time it undertook the international representation of the British movement, but ceased to do so with the reconstitution of the International Federation of Trade Unions after 1918; thereafter the G.F.T.U. no longer had any sort of importance for the general trade union movement.

<sup>2</sup> P. de Rousiers, *Le Trade Unionisme en Angleterre* (1897), p. 184.

#### CHAPTER 4 : THE UNIONS ENTER POLITICS (1900-10)

DURING the 'nineties Socialist delegates to the Trades Union Congress had persistently moved for the establishment of a Parliamentary fund, with no substantial success. In 1893 the T.U.C. accepted the proposal in principle, with the added proviso that any candidates supported by such a fund should be independent of the Liberal or Conservative Parties ; but the majority was small, and nothing was done. When the matter was raised more sharply, at the Edinburgh Congress in 1896, a motion insisting that a referendum of affiliated unions should be taken was rejected by 136 votes to 62. But the Socialists persisted and a resolution drafted by I.L.P. members was proposed by the moderate Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants at the Plymouth T.U.C. in 1899 ; this resolution directed the calling of a special conference, representing trade unions, co-operative societies and Socialist organisations, to consider means of increasing Labour representation ; it was adopted on a card vote by 546,000 to 434,000, the miners and the cotton unions notably dissenting.

The special conference met in London in February, 1900. There were present 129 delegates, from trade unions totalling a membership of 500,000 and from the Socialist bodies totalling a membership of under 70,000. It was agreed to establish a separate body called the Labour Representation Committee, as a

federation of trade unions and trades councils, co-operative societies and Socialist organisations; an executive was elected, consisting of seven trade unionists, two each from the I.L.P. and the Social Democratic Federation, and one from the Fabian Society, while James Ramsay MacDonald, a young Scottish expatriate politician who had recently exchanged Liberalism for the I.L.P. (as we have noted) was appointed secretary.<sup>1</sup>

For over a year the new Labour Party, as it was soon to be called, hung fire. It attracted no substantial affiliations and at the General Election of 1900, when it put forward fifteen candidates, only two were elected. Then, as it were overnight, there came a sudden change when the developing legal attack climaxed in the famous Taff Vale decision of July 1901. This arose out of a strike of railwaymen on the then independent Taff Vale lines in South Wales, which was so effective that 100,000 miners were thrown idle, and which attracted much attention because the Company sought to introduce Collison's "Pinkertons" as blacklegs, an attempt that the exceptional determination and ingenuity of the picketing prevented. Fog signals were used to warn pickets of the approach of trains bearing blacklegs, the track was greased on inclines so that trains were brought to a standstill through the engine wheels slipping, enabling pickets to uncouple trucks and let them run back to the bottom, while unattended locomotives were expertly put out of action. Furious, the Company went to the High Court, secured an injunction against the union (the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants), which was appealed against but upheld

<sup>1</sup> It has often been said that many delegates voted for the relatively unknown MacDonald in error, thinking they were voting for James MacDonald, secretary of the London Trades Council, and one of the best-known Socialist trade unionists of the day.

by the House of Lords. An action for heavy damages was likewise successful and altogether the union was mulcted to the tune of £35,000, of which the Company's damages amounted to £28,000. The effect of the decision was to destroy, by what has been called a "judicial *coup d'état*," the entire legal rights of trade unions as established by the Acts of 1871-6, and to make strikes "for all practical purposes absolutely illegal."<sup>1</sup>

There was consequently much excitement at the Swansea T.U.C. in September 1901, and a union rush to affiliate to the Labour Representation Committee began. Affiliations jumped by 100,000 within a year, and in 1902-3 practically doubled, the figure then standing at nearly 850,000.<sup>2</sup> The time was certainly ripe for action, for there had been signs enough of general governing class support for the anti-union drive typified by Taff Vale. In the winter of 1901 *The Times* had widely featured a long series of articles entitled "The Crisis in British Industry," which cynically drew on the more than dubious source of the egregious Collison and the employers who backed him to re-hash all the hoary allegations about trade union "ca'canny," "intimidation" and so forth, with the apparent aim of crabbing the unions' independent political efforts.<sup>3</sup>

Labour by-election successes now began to point the way to big developments ahead, as it became clear that the existing Tory Government had no intention of remedying the unions' new legal disabilities. Most striking was the triumph of Will Crooks (Coopers) at Woolwich in March 1903, when an aggressive Labour

<sup>1</sup> Lord Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> This was the moment chosen by the S.D.F. sectarians to withdraw from the L.R.C.!

<sup>3</sup> Hutt: *A Forgotten Campaign of The Times against Trade Unionism (Modern Quarterly. Vol. 2, No. 1).*

campaign, on a free trade programme, won victory in a Tory stronghold. But the most startling success was reserved for the General Election of 1906, when the biggest Liberal landslide of all time thrust the Tories into the wilderness. Fifty Labour candidates were put up and, to the surprise of a political world still quaking from the seismic shocks of the Russian Revolution of 1905, no less than twenty-nine were returned. Yet though the working class experienced for a space an apocalyptic uplifting, the triumph was not really so sensational. In many cases Liberals had withdrawn and their votes gone to the Labour men in straight fights.

Immediate legal redress was afforded to the unions with the passage of the Trades Disputes Act (1906). This absolved unions of any legal responsibility for civil damages in respect of actions by their members or officials in furtherance of a trade dispute, and also expressly ensured the legality of picketing. The Taff Vale decision was thus reversed. But thereafter the session was one of legislative sterility and the beginnings of disillusionment and unrest made themselves evident. The new political expression of trade unionism was, after all, as Lenin said in 1908, only the "first step . . . towards a conscious class policy and a *Socialist Workers' Party*." The lack of a clear and firmly-grasped Socialist outlook and theory had only too practical results; a famous historian aptly remarked that while the Labour M.P.s of 1906 were completely *class* representatives (the vast majority being of working-class origin) they were just as completely *undogmatic*, so that astute Liberal imperialists like Lords Grey and Haldane could boast that they found them much more "reasonable" to handle than if they had been gentlemen.<sup>1</sup> And though the battle

<sup>1</sup> Elie Halévy, *History of the English People: Epilogue*, Vol. II, p. 91.

for the political independence of the Labour Party had been keenly fought at its Newcastle conference in 1903, Keir Hardie crying to the old-time Liberal-Labour objectors :

The opponents of independence really meant to bring Labour back to a policy of weak and unprincipled opportunism. . . . Let them beware lest they surrender themselves to Liberalism, which would shackle them, gag them, and leave them a helpless, discredited, and impotent mass,

it appeared in the years that followed 1906 as if those words of warning were being literally borne out, but by the supposedly independent Parliamentary Labour Party under the leadership of Hardie and MacDonald.<sup>1</sup>

That opening Edwardian decade of the century saw the new imperialist system come to full fruition. New alliances abroad, with the old enemy France and with reactionary Russia, presaged the coming conflict with Britain's great rival, Germany. At home wealth accumulated while men decayed. Edward VII was a monarch after plutocracy's own heart ; there was wholesale ennobling of wealthy men, and the sale of honours created a scandal. The social contrasts appeared sharper than ever ; they were searchingly exposed in *Riches and Poverty*, a statistical study by L. G. (later Sir Leo) Chiozza Money, a Radical publicist, which was first published in 1905 and ran through many editions. Money showed that out of a total population of 43,000,000 no less than 38,000,000 fell into the category of poor—more than the total population of the country forty years before.

The condition of the working class was worsening, both relatively and absolutely. While money wages

<sup>1</sup> The avoidance of any clear Socialist definition of aims on the Labour Party's part was a feature of these years (Hutt, *This Final Crisis*, pp. 212-18).

rose hardly at all between 1900 and 1908 (only by 1 per cent.), profits rose by  $12\frac{1}{2}$  per cent. Further, the cost of living was steadily rising; in the decade ending 1910 wages expressed in terms of food prices dropped by about 10 per cent. Five out of every eight adult male manual workers earned less than the absolute minimum living wage (then generally accepted as 30s. a week) and only three out of eight were above that standard. Sweating still flourished in many trades where female labour was general, and wages as low as 8s. for a full week's work were typical; in the case of the women chainmakers of Cradley Heath, which became a national scandal, wages were from 6s. 6d. to 8s. a week, from which deductions of 2s. or more for fuel and forge-rent were taken. After much controversy the Trade Boards Act was passed in 1909 to deal with sweating, but was at first (and for several years) only applied to four industries.

Unemployment became a pressing problem. A new note was struck by stormy demonstrations in London and Glasgow and the organisation of hunger marches. Out of a Royal Commission on the Poor Law it emerged that the outrages of Bumbledom continued to flourish, and the monstrous spirit of the New Poor Law of 1834—that to be a pauper was to be a criminal—was seen to be very much alive. Trade union concern over unemployment and demands that the Parliamentary Labour Party use more drastic methods to compel the Government to act met with angry replies from MacDonald, complaining of the "uninformed criticism" of the protesters and the "utter rubbish" of their demands.

In these circumstances the strike movement began to develop. The first was small in the numbers involved but spectacular in character, and was of importance because it showed how strike action could

win recognition and improved conditions. It was the music-hall strike of February 1907, in which the artists and the whole staff of twenty-two London halls took part, and the pickets numbered over 2,500. Naturally there was wide press publicity for a strike in which a leading figure was Marie Lloyd, who staged a perfect late entrance to the official inquiry that was set up, protesting that she hadn't had any breakfast (though it was half-past eleven in the morning and Marie was dressed to kill) and joyfully slapping her counsel on the back when her evidence was concluded.

Among other disputes that year there were two particularly long-drawn-out strikes on the north-east coast against wage cuts ; one of engineers lasted for seven months, one of shipwrights and joiners nearly five. In Belfast a strike of dockers was enlarged by a sympathetic strike of carters and, in the Ulster fashion, was set upon by the authorities with the utmost violence ; more especially, no doubt, since it was led by Jim Larkin and James Connolly. Troops to the number of 10,000 were called out. There were cavalry charges, while infantry fire in the working-class districts killed many and wounded scores more.

Of main importance for the future was the railwaymen's All Grades movement, which now carried forward the abortive attempt of ten years earlier to compel the companies to make general concessions in wages, hours and conditions. Once again the railway companies, living up to their reputation as Capital's diehards, refused to entertain the demands and insolently denied the men's grievances. This, although an elaborate survey conducted by the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants revealed that over 100,000, or nearly 89 per cent., of the railwaymen worked for a standard wage of 20s. a week or less (figures later confirmed by an independent census



taken by the Board of Trade). Accordingly the A.S.R.S. and the General Railway Workers' Union took strike ballots; these favoured ceasing work by the remarkable majority of 80,026 to 1,857. When, in November 1907, a national rail strike was at hand Mr. Lloyd George, then President of the Board of Trade, intervened. Eventually both sides accepted the Governmental proposal of an elaborate system of Conciliation Boards, both local and national. But while the men elected union nominees as their representatives on these boards, and small sectional ameliorations were achieved, the major demands remained unappeased, and in any event the obstruction and evasion practised by the companies *vis-à-vis* the boards acted as an increasing irritant.

There followed some activity on the cotton front. The spinners, finding the Brooklands agreement operating to their disadvantage, had formally terminated it in 1905; and three years later the unsatisfactory provisional arrangements which had taken its place led to a seven weeks' strike, which ended in a compromise generally in the operatives' favour. There was a fair crop of local cotton strikes, particularly over the non-union issue, and in 1910 a lockout followed the operatives' insistence on the reinstatement of a grinder who was dismissed from a Shaw mill.

Among the miners there was a good deal going forward. In 1908 the eight-hour day had been made statutory, and the Miners' Federation had been completed by the long-delayed adhesion of the Northumberland and Durham unions. Next year there was a dispute in Scotland, where the owners demanded a reduction in the percentage on basis rates from 50 to 37½. This was rejected and a Federation ballot showed a large majority for a national strike in defence

of the Scotsmen, which Mr. Winston Churchill, who had succeeded Mr. Lloyd George at the Board of Trade, countered by threatening a special Act for compulsory arbitration. Against the objections of Robert Smillie, Scottish miners' president, agreement was eventually concluded on a recoupment basis.

This was the general picture when, in 1909, yet another legal onslaught was launched against the trade unions, and directly arising out of their political activity. Once again the blow fell on the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, one of whose members named Osborne (who happened to be of that strange breed, a Tory working man, and certainly did not act as a free agent) brought an action to restrain the union from using its funds for political purposes. The Courts granted him his injunction and in so doing offered an interpretation of the law which appeared to render illegal not only any political activity in the Parliamentary sense, but any union association in bodies like Trades Councils or the T.U.C.

Other injunctions followed; but the Liberal Government, preoccupied with Mr. Lloyd George's celebrated Budget and the "Peers v. People" campaign, showed no anxiety to remedy this new travesty of law which the judges had produced.<sup>1</sup> The immediate effect was to give some fillip to the declining fortunes of the Labour Party among the unions; but still more to demonstrate to the mass of trade unionists the kind of enemy they were up against and to fan still further the fires of unrest.

<sup>1</sup> The Trade Union Act of 1913 was a tardy and grudging attempt, of a most unsatisfactory kind, to regularise the position. Henceforth unions had to establish separate political funds, raised by a specific levy, and objectors were given the right to "contract-out."

## CHAPTER 5 : THE GREAT OFFENSIVE (1910-14)

THE four brief years that ran from the accession of George V to the outbreak of the first World War were of outstanding importance in the history of trade unionism. They were the years of the "Labour unrest"—most widespread the country had ever known—constantly headlined in every newspaper and the staple theme of publicists of all brands. Nor was this the unrest of a working class whose conditions are being attacked and is rallying to their defence; it was the unrest that pushes men forward to counter-attack, to open an offensive all along the line for new and positive objectives; it was to draw the comment from Lenin<sup>1</sup> that :

the masses of the English workers are slowly but surely taking a new path—from the defence of the petty privileges of the labour aristocracy to the great heroic struggle of the masses themselves for a new system of society.

Symptomatic was the remarkably rapid growth of the unions, which counted a total membership of under 2½ millions at the beginning of this short period and nearly 4 millions at its end; in the same period T.U.C. affiliations rose from rather over 1½ millions to nearly 2½ millions. The disillusionment with the Labour Party, under its I.L.P. leadership, and the fact that no authoritative revolutionary party had

<sup>1</sup> In an article written in 1918; quoted in *Lenin on Britain*, p. 180.

emerged from the Socialist sects, gave this great movement of revolt its predominantly trade union, and within the unions its rank-and-file, character.

Distrust of "politics" was heightened by the Liberal Government's attempt at what has been suggestively called the "sterilising" of the Labour movement. The Lloyd Georgian social reform policy, with its establishment of Trade Boards, Labour exchanges, National Insurance, provided large numbers of posts in the State bureaucracy which did not require the ordinary entrance examination. These posts, which were estimated to number some 4,000 to 5,000, formed a kind of "spoils system" with which to reward aspiring trade union officials, the products of University tutorial classes and so forth.<sup>1</sup>

The movement of 1910-14 carried forward the initiative of 1889 and the New Unionism. Again the big battles were fought by the labouring mass, with the dockers in the van; to them being added other transport workers, miners, railwaymen. Transport trade unionism registered the biggest advances of any, gaining nearly half a million new members in these years. The organisation of general labourers also pushed rapidly ahead (thus the small Workers' Union, with only 5,000 members in 111 branches in 1910, expanded during 1911-13 to 91,000 members in 567 branches).

There were, however, important new features. The Syndicalist propaganda of revolutionary trade unionism, of which Tom Mann was the leading exponent, had considerable effect. Organisation by industry, supplanting separate organisation by craft, became the slogan of the advanced young men in the movement; and such doctrines of wider unity and solidarity found a natural corollary in the preaching and

<sup>1</sup> Halévy, *op. cit.*, pp. 438-40.

practising of the sympathetic strike, with its final extension the general strike. Propagating these new lines in union policy there developed specific militant groups and movements among the rank and file. These were of particular importance among the South Wales miners, where the unofficial Reform Movement, as it styled itself, produced its own local organs and aroused frantic capitalist denunciations with the publication of a famous militant pamphlet, *The Miners' Next Step* (1912)<sup>1</sup>; among the railwaymen, whose union amalgamation was hailed as a victory and an example by the industrial unionists; among the craft-divided building trades, where the "amalgamationists" were an active force and a new all-in organisation, the Building Workers' Industrial Union, entered on a brief career; and among the engineers, where active spirits in the workshops, particularly on the Clyde, were spreading the new ideas that were to come to such striking fruition in 1914-18. Finally, there was a marked advance in women's trade union activity, the National Federation of Women Workers being formed to cater for women in unorganised trades, and there were a number of women's strikes. The high point was the Bermondsey women's "rising" of August 1911, when a couple of dozen separate factories spontaneously struck, and after three hectic weeks wage advances were won in eighteen of them.

Reactions of the new spirit were marked among many of the old craft unions. A lockout of boiler-

<sup>1</sup> The Unofficial Movement's campaign for union reorganisation and centralisation brought it into sharp conflict with the old leaders, notably Mr. William Brace and "Mabon" Abraham, who "breathed fire and blood against the frothy demagogues of syndicalism," both in the Federation and in the local coalowners' press. The Unofficial Movement was responsible for pressing the idea of the Triple Alliance of miners, railwaymen and transport workers (Ness Edwards, *History of the South Wales Miners' Federation*, Vol. I, pp. 66-78).

makers in 1910, following sporadic strikes, was an example; for as the dispute lengthened so the votes against settlement rose. In 1911 the haughty London Society of Compositors conducted the first complete strike of its trade (newspapers excluded), and the lively daily strike sheet that the comps. produced, the *Daily Herald*, preluded its regular appearance, the following year, as the first Labour daily, conducted by George Lansbury and his friends.<sup>1</sup> At the turn of the year the Lancashire weavers struck against non-unionism and were locked out, a type of dispute that was to become widespread in many trades (especially building). The A.S.E. itself reacted to the pressure of events and new ideas, and in 1912 revised its rules so as to open its ranks to every worker, of whatever degree of skill, in engineering.<sup>2</sup>

Turning now to the major movements we may begin with the transport workers. In November 1910 the several unions of dockers and other transport men had gathered their forces into the Transport Workers' Federation. With the rising cost of living and the failure to tackle the problem of casualisation the dockers were by this time virtually no better off than they had been in 1889; and a strike by the seamen in June 1911 for a uniform scale at all ports and other improvements in conditions, accompanied by stormy outbursts at Southampton and Hull, produced an immediate reaction on the waterfront. The dockers and carters in Manchester struck and in July the port

<sup>1</sup> It was followed in November 1912 by the *Daily Citizen* as an official trade union and Labour Party organ. In contrast to the free-for-all, emotional rebelliousness of the *Herald* the *Citizen* reflected all too well the uninspiring contemporary leadership of Labour, and though the unions raised in all £200,000 of capital for it, within the first year of the war it came to an unsung end.

<sup>2</sup> Three years later, however, the revision was rescinded. Very few had joined in the new Class F membership that had been established.

of London was closed down by a strike exceeding in magnitude and effectiveness even its great predecessor. The dockers demanded that their "tanner" be raised to 8d., with 1s. an hour for overtime. Other demands were put forward by the stevedores, gas-workers, carters, coal-porters, tugmen, grain porters and so on.

Faced with this united movement the Port of London Authority, headed by Lord Devonport, and with the support of the Liberal Government, point-blank refused any negotiations. At the request of Mr. Winston Churchill, now Home Secretary, the War Office reinforced the London garrison and took the gravely provocative step of threatening to dispatch 25,000 troops to the docks to break the strike by doing the dockers' work.<sup>1</sup> Tension became acute. Daily demonstrations of the strikers on Tower Hill were of unprecedented size, the accompanying marches through the City scoring as many as 100,000 participants. Eventually the Government recoiled from action that would certainly have resulted in insurrection, persuaded the port authorities to meet the unions, and a subsequent arbitration award conceded most of the men's demands, including the basic 8d. an hour and the 1s. an hour overtime.

Parallel movements had taken place in other ports (also registering substantial gains), of which that at Liverpool almost amounted to civil war. Here there had been a general transport strike, embracing dockers, seamen, carters, tramwaymen, railwaymen, a total of 70,000 being out. Tom Mann was the leading figure and a great outcry was caused by the police brutality in charging a monster demonstration on St. George's Plateau. Warships were moored in the Mersey, their guns trained on the city. The troops were called out

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 501.

and two workers were shot when a crowd of demonstrators, said to be attempting a rescue of prisoners, were fired on. So alarmed were the authorities that the local Territorials, who included many trade unionists and who at that time kept their arms at home, were peremptorily ordered to remove the bolts from their rifles and turn them in at headquarters.<sup>1</sup>

The successes scored by these strikes, however, left the waterfront far from quiet. In January 1912 the Glasgow dockers struck and in May the men on the Thames and the Medway were in action again. There had been breaches of the 1911 agreement, it was claimed, and there was strong feeling on the issue of non-unionism and the recognition of the Transport Workers' Federation ticket, it being asserted that the employers were definitely discriminating against trade unionists. The strike brought 100,000 men out in London, but did not secure a wide national response, some 20,000 men only striking at provincial ports. Despite Government intervention Lord Devonport and his associates this time refused to budge an inch, simply stating that if work were resumed they would undertake to observe the 1911 agreement and to consider representations. Yet even when at the end of July the strike committee decided to call off the struggle, the dockers, though now enduring acute privation, unanimously resolved to continue; work was, however, resumed a week later.

The big transport struggles of the summer of 1911 touched off the discontent that had been rapidly rising among the railwaymen as a result of the unsatisfactory settlement of 1907. Spontaneous and unofficial local strikes by railwaymen at Liverpool,

<sup>1</sup> For this interesting item of history I am indebted to the personal recollections of Mr. H. Kelly, now Education Secretary of the Liverpool Co-operative Society.



Manchester and some other centres produced a general demand for a national strike. Uniting their forces the executives of the railway unions thereupon dispatched a twenty-four hours' ultimatum to the companies. The Government intervened, and once again showed their solidarity with the employers. The Prime Minister (Mr. Asquith), addressing the union representatives in the most hostile and bellicose fashion, offered a vague Royal Commission and intimated that the Government would use military force to the limit to break any strike. "Then your blood be on your own head," he retorted when the empty offer was rejected and the unions issued their orders for the first national railway strike. "Blood" was the operative word, for

at the instance of Mr. Winston Churchill . . . an overpowering display was made with the troops, which were sent to Manchester and other places, without requisition by the civil authorities, at the mere request of the Companies. In fact, a policy of repression had been decided on, and bloodshed was near at hand.<sup>1</sup>

At Llanelly a strike demonstration was fired on and among the numerous casualties two were fatal; intense anger was aroused and the "massacre" denounced in Parliament.

While the strike was not complete—200,000 railwaymen came out—its entire disorganisation of the railway service was speedily bringing the whole of industry to a standstill. The Government found itself compelled to abandon the Churchillian shoot-'em-down position, using as a pretext the critical international situation (it was the time of the Agadir incident). So the railway companies were forced to meet the unions for the first time, an inquiry was held, and after renewed company obduracy was overcome

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 529.

by the threat of a further strike agreement was finally reached. The Conciliation Boards were reformed and permitted to have union representatives as secretaries, thus according the unions a sort of backdoor *de facto* recognition.

As a result of this strike railway trade unionism was transformed. Some idea of the fillip that was given to organisation can be got from the example of the Railway Clerks' Association, youngest of the railway unions, which had only 10,000 members in 1910, but which trebled its membership in the three years following the strike. The big event, however, was the establishment in 1918, after long negotiations, of the National Union of Railwaymen, a fusion of the A.S.R.S., the General Railway Workers' Union and the small United Pointsmen and Signalmen; the craft-conscious Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen stood aloof. For the first time a union took its stand frankly on the principle of Industrial Unionism, declaring its object to be the organisation of every worker employed on or in connection with a railway, no matter what his grade or craft.<sup>1</sup> Not less significant was the structure and functioning of the constitution of this twentieth-century "New Model." It combined an elaborate representative apparatus—Annual General Meeting, Executive Committee with sectional sub-committees, District Councils—with a concentration of extensive powers in the hands of the Executive, who by rule initiate and conduct all trade movements and are not necessarily bound by any ballot vote of the members, and not least in the hands of the general officers, a

<sup>1</sup> Thereby challenging, not only the A.S.L.E.F., with whom a bitter feud began, but also the engineering and other craft unions catering for the mechanics in the railway shops. Demarcation disputes between the N.U.R. and the craft unions over the shopmen were to become endemic.

circumstance reflected in the long domination of J. H. Thomas as general secretary.

The opening skirmishes of the miners' struggle ante-dated the transport and railway strikes but did not reach their climax till later. In the autumn of 1910 disputes over payment for abnormal places in the pit produced a bitter strike of the 10,000 miners employed by the Cambrian Combine in the Rhondda Valleys. The arrogant attitude of the owners, headed by the late D. A. Thomas (Lord Rhondda), aroused a blaze of resentment and there were stormy demonstrations. Metropolitan police and troops were sent up the valleys and clashed with strikers at Tonypany. Throughout 1911 these parts of the South Wales coal-field continued in a ferment of local strikes ; meantime the Miners' Federation was raising nationally the abnormal-place issue and negotiating for district minima, but without success.

A delegate conference of the M.F.G.B. in December 1911 decided to take a ballot for a national strike to establish the principle of a minimum wage—5s. a shift for men, 2s. for boys ; when the vote was declared in January 1912 it showed a majority of 445,800 to 115,271 in favour of a strike. The owners, utterly blind to the development of opinion among the miners, refused to accept the minimum wage as a principle but said they were prepared to resume the discussion of payment for abnormal places. By March 1st the strike was complete. A million miners ceased work as one man ; and the first national miners' strike proved to be, not merely the vastest labour conflict ever known up to that time in this country, but the most thorough and sensational industrial close-down. The Government hastily intervened, drafted a Minimum Wage Bill, and rushed it into law by the end of March. This measure did not meet the miners'

demands for a specified national minimum, instead prescribing machinery for the determination of district minima. A ballot favoured continuing the strike by 244,011 votes to 201,013, but a delegate conference on April 6th agreed to resume work.<sup>1</sup> The Miners' Federation had strikingly demonstrated its offensive power, and within a year the number of trade unionists in mining had leapt by nearly 160,000 to over 900,000. In a wider sense, as Lenin wrote :

The miners' strike positively represents a new epoch. . . . Since the strike the British proletariat *is no longer the same*. The workers have learned to fight. They have discovered the *path* which will lead to victory. They have realised their power. . . . A change has taken place in the relation of social forces in England which cannot be expressed in figures, but which everyone feels.<sup>2</sup>

After the transport workers, the railwaymen and the miners had thus fought their major engagements the offensive branched out into an unprecedented series of smaller strikes affecting almost all branches of industry. The year 1913 was remarkable, to quote the official report, for its number of disputes—"far exceeding the number recorded in any previous year. Practically all the main groups of trades were affected by the increase in the number of disputes, notably the building, metal, engineering and shipbuilding, and textile trades," though no one dispute involved more than 50,000 workers. Typical of capitalist concern was the newspaper comment :

Perhaps the most salient feature of this turmoil at the moment is the general spirit of revolt, not only against employers of all kinds, but also against leaders and

<sup>1</sup> On the principle that a two-thirds majority is necessary for the continuance of a strike.

<sup>2</sup> *Lenin on Britain*, pp. 106-7.

majorities, and Parliamentary or any kind of constitutional and orderly action.<sup>1</sup>

The "general spirit of revolt" seized the normally quiescent miscellaneous metal trades of Birmingham and the Black Country. Girl workers at Dudley, declaring simply that they could no longer live on their wages, came out on strike (for a minimum wage of 23s. a week). In the spring and summer of 1913 the numbers out in various metal, tube and nut and bolt works totalled 50,000; in July a ballot of thousands to ninety-nine rejected the employers' terms, and three contingents of strikers marched to London. Wage increases were granted and machinery for settling disputes established.

The most historic movement of the year did not, however, take place in this island. It was the general strike in Dublin in August and September, the baptism of fire of the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union under the revolutionary leadership of James Connolly and Jim Larkin. This fierce struggle of 80,000 Dublin workers aroused an extraordinary response here. Solidarity was symbolised in the enthusiastic dispatch through the co-operative movement of a foodship to Dublin, and in the sympathetic strikes in which some 7,000 British railwaymen took part; on the other hand Labour Party leaders like Philip Snowden went out of their way to attack the militant union policy. The wave of unlimited police terror launched against the Dublin strikers, an orgy of outrage and bludgeoning that resulted in the killing of two workers and the wounding of 400, with over 200 arrests, caused a storm of rage to sweep the working-class movement. Nor did the reaction stop at rage; new conclusions were drawn; talk of arming the workers, of general strikes and revolutionary action

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Askwith, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

spread through the trade unions. Thus at the Trades Union Congress in Manchester, Robert Smillie, president of the Miners' Federation, said :

If revolution is going to be forced upon my people by such action as has been taken in Dublin and elsewhere I say it is our duty, legal or illegal, to train our people to defend themselves. . . . It is the duty of the greater trade union movement, when a question of this gravity arises, to discuss seriously the idea of a strike of all the workers.<sup>1</sup>

Everything pointed to the maturing of a first-class political and social crisis in the latter part of 1914. Already in November 1913 Lord Askwith, the leading official industrial mediator, told a select audience that "within a comparatively short time there may be movements in this country coming to a head of which recent events have been a small foreshadowing." The cost of living continued to rise, and the trade union rank and file redoubled their efforts at building up union organisation, the number of strikes against non-unionism steadily increasing. This last was a special feature of the London building trades during 1913, where the strikes mostly took place against the will of the union executives and led at the beginning of 1914 to a general London lockout. The employers demanded that the unions penalise their members who might strike without executive authority, that the unions give a financial bond which would be forfeit in the event of strikes in violation of the working rules of the industry, and finally—a new edition of the "document"—that each individual worker sign a personal agreement to work quietly with non-unionists, under penalty of a pound fine. The lockout lasted for over six months, and settlement proposals were rejected by ballot; accordingly the

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Trades Union Congress, Manchester, 1913, p. 72.*

employers decided on a national lockout. They were forestalled by the outbreak of war.

The builders' battle was only one of many. The official figures told their own story. While the number of disputes in 1908 averaged little over 30 a month, rising to nearly 75 a month in 1911, in the latter half of 1913 and the first half of 1914 the tempo literally doubled, something like 150 strikes a month being recorded. "British trade unionism," say the Webbs, "was in fact in the summer of 1914 working up for an almost revolutionary outburst of gigantic industrial disputes."<sup>1</sup> The big battalions were again making ready for the fray. The miners were preparing new claims for the autumn. The transport workers were organising fast. A new forward movement by the railwaymen, once more exasperated by the quibbling and trickery of the companies in the operation of the Conciliation Boards, was at hand; and it was evident that this would bear a political character. Transcending questions of wages and hours, the railwaymen gave a new angle to the oft-repeated demand for the nationalisation of the railways, hardy annual of so many conferences. They made it clear that what they wanted was a voice in control; a resolution prepared by the N.U.R. for submission to the 1914 T.U.C. stated that "no system of State ownership of the railways will be acceptable to organised railwaymen which does not guarantee to them their full political and social rights" and "allow them a due measure of control and responsibility in the safe and efficient working of the railway system." Finally, the agreement in the engineering industry was due to end and wide demands on wages, hours and conditions generally were expected.

What was most significant of all about these indica-

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 690.

tions of coming struggles was that the principal combatants were forging among themselves a new and wider unity. On the initiative of the Miners' Federation—under pressure of its own rank-and-file militants—proposals had been made for the establishment of an alliance for mutual aid with the railwaymen and the transport workers. In 1914 this was agreed to by the N.U.R. and the Transport Workers' Federation, and the Triple Alliance, as it was immediately called, took shape. This powerful new alignment of forces took place on a background of steadily sharpening militant political trends among the union rank and file who, in contrast to the complacent and now hopelessly Liberalised MacDonaldite leadership of the Labour Party, realised that :

the paths of advancement were narrow, devious and blocked. . . . There was effervescence, and behind the effervescence there were movements growing, with demands for shorter working hours, more pay and more power, both over industry and in the government of the country. The young men were ready to move. . . . There was a spirit of unrest which vaguely expressed itself in an oft-heard phrase—"wait till the autumn."<sup>1</sup>

It was not as if this movement, and such events as the founding of the Triple Alliance, occurred in an otherwise normal atmosphere. The Home Rule crisis, with the Tory-Ulster rebellion of March 1914, had presented the governing class with an extremely grave situation. After that wild incitement to, and preparation for, civil war by the noble landlords, the Tory politicians and the Army officers, it might well be felt that "the working class will now very quickly shake off its Philistine faith in the scrap of paper that is called English law and Constitution, which the English aristocrats have torn up before the eyes of

<sup>1</sup> Askwith, *op. cit.*, pp. 353, 356.



the whole people.”<sup>1</sup> At a meeting in the City on July 17th, 1914, Mr. Lloyd George said openly that with Labour “insurrection” and the Irish crisis coinciding “the situation will be the gravest with which any Government has had to deal for centuries.”<sup>2</sup> A Conservative historian subsequently wrote of those days that “if the war peril from Germany delayed much longer to materialise, it seemed quite on the cards that it might be forestalled by revolution . . . it is a question whether international will not be anticipated by civil war.”<sup>3</sup>

In that same July of 1914 there came another instance of the new spirit, and in a highly inconvenient quarter. There was a strike at Woolwich Arsenal for the reinstatement of a dismissed worker. But the problems that looked so lowering and full of menace to the existing order that July vanished—or so it seemed—in the early days of August. At the beginning of that month there were 100 strikes in progress ; at the end of the month only twenty. The war with Germany had “materialised” in time to dissipate an internal crisis as well as to attempt the solution of an external one.

<sup>1</sup> *Lenin on Britain*, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Halévy, *op. cit.*, p. 478.

<sup>3</sup> Esmé Wingfield-Stratford, *The Victorian Aftermath*, p. 310.

## PERIOD IV

### CHAPTER 6 : " PART OF THE SOCIAL MACHINERY OF THE STATE " (1914-18)

THE first World War marked a decisive break for the trade union movement and introduced an entirely new period. It brought what the Webbs called a "revolutionary transformation of the social and political standing of the official representatives of the trade union world"; this being an essential element in the "recognition" of the union apparatus as "part of the social machinery of the State."<sup>1</sup> The reason for this was simple. "If organised Labour had been against the war it is safe to say that the national effort could not have been maintained"<sup>2</sup>; and without the fullest collaboration of the union leaders and the machine they controlled, the working class could not be harnessed to the war chariot of imperialism. That collaboration could not be secured by the old-fashioned co-operation of the unions with the employers; it required a direct and organised relation between the unions and the central organ of class rule, the State; a relation which it was hoped to consolidate by drawing the union leaders into the State machine.

This vital change was the result of the abandonment

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 635.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 692.

by the union leaders, in common with their Labour Party colleagues and the majority of the old Socialist International, of their repeated pre-war pledges to prevent war or to end it by revolutionary means if it did break out. The stages of that abandonment were interesting. On August 1st Arthur Henderson and Keir Hardie, as international representatives of the British movement, issued a manifesto condemning the "infamy" of war on the side of "Russian despotism" and concluding "Workers, stand together therefore for peace! Combine and conquer the militarist enemy and the self-seeking imperialists, to-day once and for all. . . . Down with class rule! Down with the rule of brute force! Down with war! Up with the peaceful rule of the people!" These sentiments were repeated next day in a resolution adopted by a united anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square addressed by leading trade unionists like Henderson and Will Thorne, by George Lansbury, Hardie and others. On August 4th Britain declared war on Germany. Three days later the Parliamentary Labour Party decided to make no pronouncement on the vote for war credits and Henderson was elected leader in place of Ramsay MacDonald, who resigned. A week after that the postponement "for a short time" of the annual T.U.C. was announced; the postponement turned out to be cancellation. Before the end of August an "industrial truce" was declared by a conference of the T.U.C. Parliamentary Committee, the Labour Party Executive and the Management Committee of the General Federation of Trade Unions. At the beginning of September the T.U.C. Committee issued a manifesto to all trade unionists commending the Labour Party's decision to participate in an "all-Party" recruiting campaign, and declaring that "upon the result of the struggle in

which this country is now engaged rest the preservation and maintenance of free and unfettered democratic government." On October 15th the T.U.C. joined with Labour M.P.s and other leaders to issue a definitive statement of views on the war; "the victory of Germany would mean the death of democracy in Europe," it was asserted.

"Business as usual" was the complacent slogan of the opening months of the war; but it soon appeared that business was very much not as usual. Dislocation of industry, the urgent demand for munitions (which led to wholesale attacks on existing standards and what an official historian has called "something little short of a debauch of long hours"), and a steeply rising cost of living, produced a wave of unrest and a number of local unofficial strikes. While industrial disputes had dwindled to twenty by the end of August 1914, they rose to seventy-four in March 1915. Most important was the strike of engineers on the Clyde in February, led by a "Central Withdrawal of Labour Committee" appointed by the men in the shops; significant also was a strike at the great Elswick works of Armstrong Whitworths against the putting of unskilled men to skilled work. Accordingly the Government summoned the principal union leaders to a conference at the Treasury in February 1915. By the agreement there concluded, to which the miners refused to be party, "the trade union lamb has lain down with the capitalist lion"<sup>1</sup> and the process began which, statutorily confirmed by the Munitions of War Acts (1915-17), was to produce "virtually 'industrial conscription'."<sup>2</sup> The right to strike was abandoned "for the duration," its place being taken by Government arbitration; all trade union rules and condi-

<sup>1</sup> *The Herald*, July 17th, 1915.

<sup>2</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 639.

tions were suspended ; “ dilution ” of labour on the most massive scale was initiated ; the introduction of “ leaving certificates ” practically tied the worker to his job.

To induce the union leaders thus to surrender every hard-earned standard, and to disarm completely into the bargain, the Government gave three pledges. The first was that the suspended union conditions should be restored in full after the war ; the second was that the removal of all restrictions should in no way redound to the private profit of the employers ; the third was that a minimum wage for war work should be ensured, together with the payment of wages to “ dilutees ” identical with those previously paid to skilled men on the same job. Every one of these pledges was dishonoured. Trade union conditions were not restored ; all that the Government did in 1919 was to enable workers to take legal action against employers who failed to restore them, such restoration to be obligatory for only one year. A “ munitions levy ” imposed in 1916 to check profits was abolished within a year in favour of the farcical Excess Profits Duty ; so that the war produced “ the most amazing profits that this country has ever witnessed. . . . Above £4,000,000,000 of profits made owing to the war and during the war and in excess of the profits made before the war.”<sup>1</sup> There were no identical wages for “ dilutees,” notably the women, and unending disputation and shuffling about the enforcement of any minimum wage. To sum it up :

The trade unionists, in fact, who had at the outset of the war patriotically refrained from bargaining as to the price of their aid, were, on the whole, “ done ” at its close. Though here and there particular sections had received exceptionally high earnings in the time of

<sup>1</sup> Lord Buckmaster in the House of Lords, February 18th, 1919.

stress, the rates of wages, taking industry as a whole, did not, as the Government returns prove, rise either so quickly or so high as the cost of living ; so that, whilst many persons suffered great hardship, the great majority of wage-earners found the product in commodities of their rates of pay in 1919 less rather than more than it was in 1913.<sup>1</sup>

Of special interest was the position in the aircraft industry, then in its infancy but already of prime military importance. The official union history subsequently revealed “ how the Government was prepared even to jeopardise the winning of the war in its anxiety to propitiate the employers who were profiteering at the expense of the aircraft workers.”<sup>2</sup> Events also showed how Government-employer “ intolerable sweating ” could be beaten, given strong workshop organisation and a willingness on the part of the unions themselves to unite and fight. As the newest of the war industries aircraft manufacture was then in a chaotic state ; in London, for instance, twenty-three factories paid eleven distinct and different district rates, usually below the normal rate for the class of work. Men were drawn to aircraft from many woodworking trades, covered by a dozen different unions. All the unions were represented, however, in a London District Aircraft Workers’ Committee, set up in 1914 ; but two years’ agitation brought no improvement and it required the handing in of strike notices<sup>3</sup> by 90 per cent. of the London men to secure even a limited wage concession. No general minimum rate was conceded, and this was taken up as a national issue by the National Woodworkers’ Aircraft Committee which the unions united to form. In addition

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, pp. 643-4.

<sup>2</sup> S. Higenbottam, *Our Society’s History* (official history of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers : Manchester, 1939), p. 212.

<sup>3</sup> Actually collective application for “ leaving certificates.”

the Committee fought against the efforts of the employers, fully backed by the Government, to generalise piecework which, the men contended, "involves danger to lives by hasty and often culpable workmanship." The Government replied :

That is our responsibility and not your responsibility. The lives of the pilots are the business of the Government, and if the Government come to the conclusion that they can afford to take risks in order to get better production, you must leave that to the wisdom of the Government.

Mr. Winston Churchill was Minister of Munitions at that time and particularly insisted on the piecework system, against which a ballot of the aircraft workers showed a huge majority. The Minister eventually agreed, in November 1917, to concede the minimum wage and other points ; but weeks passed and the necessary ministerial Order to enforce the agreement was never issued. When the chairman of the Employers' Federation coolly told the unions that "the Ministry agreeing to sign an agreement, when all is said and done, does not have the slightest effect and weight with us," arrangements were made in February 1918 for a national aircraft strike. At once the National Committee were summoned to the Ministerial presence ; let the official history finish the tale :

Churchill was supported by an imposing array of naval and military chiefs, and did his best to intimidate the Aircraft Committee by citing the various Acts which gave him power to deal with leaders who caused a national stoppage. . . . The threat to refuse to allow the strike to be called was met by the information that it had *already* been arranged and that all aircraft woodworkers in the United Kingdom would cease work on February 9th *unless* an order was issued by the Government that the employers must observe the terms of the

National Agreement. This put Churchill in a quandary ; he might arrest the members of the Committee but he could not prevent over 60,000 men walking away from their work. Finally he capitulated on the evening of February 8th, 1918.<sup>1</sup>

The aircraft position was unusual in its combination of shop organisation with union leadership. The general feature of 1914-18 was the development of shop leadership in place of the disarmed union machine. In engineering the shop stewards, already existing as card inspectors and reporters to their union district committees, were transformed into workshop representatives and leaders. This was the more marked when, as it frequently happened, the stewards no longer functioned as official union appointees but as the unofficial delegates of all the workers in their shop, irrespective of union membership. Here was the organisation “ at the point of production ” which was the workers’ answer to collaboration with the State machine.

Of this development the Clyde strike in 1915 was an early and significant symptom. It arose out of a dispute that was maturing before the war. In June 1914 the Glasgow District Committee of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, faced with the anomaly that their rate was markedly less than that in other districts, had decided on an application for a 2d. an hour increase. When this came to be made, at the turn of the year, the employers, after an exasperating delay, would not concede more than ½d. At this point the men in the shops took things into their own hands ; led by their stewards, engineers in fifteen establishments, including the large armament firms, ceased overtime on all war contracts. This step was strongly opposed by the A.S.E. Executive, who on February

<sup>1</sup> Higebottom, *op. cit.*, pp. 211-12.



12th joined with the employers in recommending the men to accept a  $\frac{3}{4}$ d. an hour increase, provocatively delaying the necessary ballot till March 9th. This was the last straw. Shop after shop came out on strike, the shop stewards gathering to form the Central Withdrawal of Labour Committee mentioned above.

This Committee bluntly claimed exclusive rights of negotiation and settlement, on the grounds (i) that the union officials were not, owing to Government pressure, free agents, and (ii) that it was the only fully representative body—i.e. representing all the unions concerned—acting on the men's behalf. The A.S.E. ballot, which rejected the employers' offer by 8,927 votes to 829, implicitly confirmed these claims; and the Committee showed its strength by holding the men out till March 4th, three days after the expiry of a Government ultimatum threatening compulsory arbitration. An immediate increase of 1d. an hour, with corresponding percentage increases in piece rates, was won.

The next movement of magnitude was the strike of South Wales miners in July 1915. The M.F.G.B. had refused to be parties to the Treasury Agreement and the Welsh valleys, as we have seen, had pioneered in militant organisation in the pits. There had long been dissatisfaction with the five-year agreement of 1910, now aggravated by the brazen way in which the coalowners "persistently endeavoured to make the war redound to their own advantage"<sup>1</sup>; and the demands of the South Wales Miners' Federation for a new agreement with wage increases and other concessions were first insolently waved aside. Then the Government intervened, through Mr. (later Lord) Runciman, President of the Board of Trade; his handling of the position "practically invited a

<sup>1</sup> *Labour Year Book*, 1916, p. 79.

strike,"<sup>1</sup> on which the Federation decided by a majority of 42,850. Hastily the Government "proclaimed" the South Wales coalfield under the punitive provisions of the Munitions Act. But 200,000 miners were not to be deterred by this threat or the wild campaign of vilification which instantly opened up throughout the entire capitalist press. They struck as one man and in less than a week the Government turned about, overrode the coalowners and conceded the main points at issue.

It was the Clyde strike, however, that marked the emergence of the shop stewards as the core of an entirely new form of workshop organisation. Out of the strike there arose the Clyde Workers' Committee, pledged to resist the Munitions Act, support of which by the union officials it stigmatised as "an act of treachery to the working class," and further proclaiming as its objects :

to obtain an ever-increasing control over workshop conditions, to regulate the terms upon which workers shall be employed, and to organise the workers upon a class basis and to maintain the class struggle until the overthrow of the wages system, the freedom of the workers and the establishment of industrial democracy have been attained.

Workers' Committees on the Clyde model were established in other centres (London, Sheffield, etc.) and in 1916 the National Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committee Movement was formed. The unit of organisation was the Shop Committee, composed of the stewards elected in the particular shop or department ; representatives of the various shop committees formed the Works or Plant Committee ; these in turn sent their representatives to constitute the Local or District Committees, which together elected the National Administrative Council of the movement.

<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78.

It was prescribed that stewards and all officers of the movement should be elected for six months, though eligible for re-election, and that frequent shop meetings should be held. Two weekly papers were established as shop stewards' organs, *The Worker* in Glasgow and *Solidarity* in London.

While the shop stewards' movement adhered to the above-quoted revolutionary objects it did not achieve clarity on the central problem of leadership. The Syndicalist antipathy to "leaders" and "politics" was still strongly marked. The National Movement's constitution laid it down that "no committee shall have executive power, all questions of policy and action being referred back to the rank and file." Several leading shop stewards, especially on the Clyde, came from the Socialist Labour Party, a strait sect which on principle forbade its members to accept any union office. Uncomprehending hostility to the conception of a revolutionary working-class political party was ideally expressed on a later occasion by Jack Tanner (now president of the Amalgamated Engineering Union) when, as shop stewards' delegate to the Second Congress of the Communist International in Moscow in 1920, he was gently but firmly taken to task on this very subject by Lenin himself in an historic debate.<sup>1</sup>

The Clyde Workers' Committee, of which William Gallacher was chairman, enjoyed the political guidance of John McLean, famous agitator and educator, outstanding revolutionary Socialist and proponent of the Bolshevik policy of revolutionary struggle against the war and for the overthrow of the capitalist régime. By the wide scope of its activities it built a position of unparalleled influence, so that when Mr. Lloyd George as Prime Minister visited Glasgow, with

<sup>1</sup> See *Lenin on Britain*, pp. 268-4.

Mr. Arthur Henderson in tow, he was compelled to approach the Committee to organise a meeting of shop stewards; and then had to endure the chagrin of being shouted down. The Committee was associated with the big rent strikes which were virtually a popular uprising, and organised efficient protection for meetings and demonstrations against "patriotic" hooligans. Nor was it weakened by persecution, such as met it after its conduct of a strike at Parkhead Forge in 1916, supported by sympathetic strikes at three other large works, over the rights of shop stewards to carry out their representative duties. A number of stewards, leading members of the Committee, were arbitrarily deported from Clydeside; among them were David Kirkwood, M.P., and the late Arthur McManus, first chairman of the Communist Party. Others were arrested and imprisoned, Gallacher getting twelve months and John McLean three years' penal servitude.

When 1917 brought the Russian Revolution the repercussions were widespread. It was the War's peak year for strikes in engineering, over 800,000 workers being involved and the "days lost" totalling nearly 2½ million. Not just shop stewards on the spot, but their new national movement, stood decisively in the lead. There were strikes at Barrow and on the Tyne in March, and an important Coventry strike in November. Biggest of all were the May strikes, which swept the Clyde, Sheffield, London and other munition centres like a tidal wave in protest against the extension of dilution and the operation of the Munitions Act; the strikers defied a peremptory Government order to resume work and eight leaders of the Shop Stewards Movement were arrested; but a settlement was speedily reached on terms agreeable to the men and the arrested leaders were released.

The Government had been driven to face the fact that the policy of coercion was breaking down. Up to July 1916 over 1,000 workers were convicted under the Munitions Act for strike activities; but strikes continued and grew bigger. So general was the unrest that a Commission of Inquiry was now appointed and its investigations put on record something of the harassing conditions of the working class.<sup>1</sup>

The overthrow of the "gendarme of Europe" and the maturing of proletarian revolution in the former land of the Tsars had an immense political effect among the British working class and specifically among the militant trade unionists and shop stewards. This was shown at the Leeds Convention in June 1917, which met with the aim of setting up Workers' and Soldiers' Councils on the model of the Russian Soviets. Of the 1,150 delegates from all sections of the movement that attended, the largest single group was 371 from trade unions and Workers' Committees. William Gallacher, speaking as a Clyde shop steward delegate, was widely applauded when he appealed for a revolutionary struggle against the war; and among other trade union speeches there was a fervid offering from a rising young leader of the Dockers' Union—Ernest Bevin. That the Convention was never followed through was no fault of the masses but of the unmilitant leadership of the I.L.P., who were in effective control of it and proved unwilling to force the pace. In the same way it was not the rank and file who were responsible for the manœuvring and intrigue connected with the proposal, endorsed by the Petrograd Soviet, for an international Socialist peace conference at Stockholm; they believed that it offered a hope of peace and therefore supported it, though it too came

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Dobb, *Trade Union Experience and Policy, 1914-18*, pp. 20-1.

to nothing and had as its main by-product the resignation of Mr. Henderson from the Coalition Cabinet.<sup>1</sup>

There were plenty of other signs of the times in that crucial year. Not least among these were the proposals of a Committee headed by Mr. J. H. Whitley, Speaker of the House of Commons, for the establishment of Joint Industrial Councils, bringing together employers and employed on a national, district and works basis; a scheme with what we would now call a distinctly “ corporative ” flavour; it was to leave its principal mark only in the Whitley Councils in the Civil Service. This Committee functioned under the Ministry of Reconstruction, set up to perform the diversional task of elaborately blueprinting that “ new world after the war ” which, of course, never materialised. The Whitley scheme, particularly the proposal for joint works councils, was evidently inspired by the desire to draw the teeth of the shop stewards as a militant force;<sup>2</sup> and the same desire was clearly present in the minds of the engineering employers when they conceded recognition of shop stewards by agreement with a number of the engineering unions in December 1917, for the agreement specified that “ shop stewards shall be subject to the control of the trade union ” and declared that “ recognition of shop stewards is accorded in order that a further safeguard may be provided against disputes.”

It was in the course of 1917 also that the constitu-

<sup>1</sup> Trade union leaders in the Cabinet were Mr. Arthur Henderson (Ironfounders), Mr. G. N. Barnes (Engineers) and Mr. John Hodge (Iron and Steel Trades).

<sup>2</sup> The point is openly made by an official who was in charge of dilution on the Clyde and elsewhere and a leading labour adviser of the War Cabinet, Sir Lynden Macassey, in his *Labour Policy False and True*, pp. 266-9.

tion of the Triple Alliance was formally ratified. An Act was passed somewhat modifying the existing statutory restrictions on union amalgamation ; while, by an ingenious scheme which by-passed the stringent requirements of the law, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation was established. Finally, at the end of the year the T.U.C. and the Labour Party jointly approved a Memorandum on War Aims. The terms proposed were publicly accepted by the Prime Minister and were shortly made the basis of President Wilson's famous Fourteen Points. With this result :

Profound was the disappointment, and bitter the resentment, of the greater part of the organised Labour Movement of Great Britain when it was revealed how seriously the diplomatists at the Paris Conference had departed from these terms in the Treaty of Peace which was imposed on the Central Empires.<sup>1</sup>

During the last desperate year of war the Shop Stewards' Movement grew and strengthened. Its power was seen in the threat of a political strike on the Clyde if the most extreme stage of the conscription " comb-out " were not abandoned, and in the successful Coventry strike against a tryout of a new labour regimentation scheme (the " embargo " on change of employer by skilled munition workers). It was the shop stewards, too, who held aloft the banner of solidarity with the Russian Revolution after November 1917, in face of the unparalleled onslaught made by the ruling class and official Labour alike on the new Power of the Soviets.

At the same time union membership greatly increased, the T.U.C. grouping over 4½ millions in 1918 against less than 2¼ millions in 1913 ; while the big employers had already united to form the Federation of British Industries, later to hand over dealings with

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, pp. 695-6.

labour questions to a further new body, the National Confederation of Employers' Organisations. Monopoly made giant strides, war-time State control paving the way for an unprecedented growth of over-capitalised trusts and combines, notably in the heavy industries (iron and steel, engineering and shipbuilding, and to a less degree coal), chemicals, power supply, transport of all kinds, and banking.

In August 1918 the police strike, out of which the Government hastened to bluff its way, came as a threat from an unexpected quarter. It coincided with a strike of transport workers demanding equal pay for women on men's work. Next month there was a cotton spinners' strike and an unofficial railway stoppage, affecting particularly South Wales; the last was the work of militant rank-and-file organisation, functioning through the semi-official district councils of the National Union of Railwaymen. Great excitement was caused by the direct action taken by the electricians when the Albert Hall was refused for a militant demonstration; they removed all the fuses and the authorities had to climb down.

By the time the Armistice came the tide of unrest was flowing fast and deep. In the key industries of engineering, shipbuilding and mining the number of workers striking was less than 1917, but the number of separate strikes was far greater, in each case being a record for the war years; and it was in the last three months of the war that the curve of struggle was rising most steeply.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Wal Hannington, *Industrial History in Wartime*, pp. 64-5.



## CHAPTER 7 : THE POST-WAR CRISIS (1919-24)

WITH the ending of the four years' agony of war the "revolutionary outburst" that was threatening in 1914 now appeared likely to materialise in a far more acute form. Capitalism in Britain, as throughout Europe, was in the throes of mortal crisis; following Russia, the tide of revolution was fast rising where Hohenzollern and Habsburg had held sway. The vastly augmented army of trade unionists<sup>1</sup> echoed the sentiments of the emergency conference of the Labour Party which, three days after the Armistice, dragged the Labour ministers out of the Coalition Government and recorded its "protest against any patching up of the old economic order." And, though the Government of Mr. Keynes' "hard-faced men who look as if they had done very well out of the war" was victorious in the Khaki Election of 1918, the opening days of the New Year boded ill for the triumphant profiteers.

The first action was fought on Clydeside at the turn of January-February 1919. It was the famous Forty-Hour strike, when engineers, shipyard and other workers united under the leadership of the Clyde Workers' Committee and the shop stewards in a struggle to shorten their working week which everyone sensed was no ordinary strike. The authorities frankly

<sup>1</sup> The T.U.C. rose in 1920 to 6½ millions: the total membership of trade unions in that year was 8½ millions.

feared a rising. Fresh troops were rushed to the scene immediately after the "Battle of George Square," when a big strike demonstration, violently attacked by the police, had fought back with sensational effect. But as William Gallacher, one of the strike's principal leaders, has since written, the preoccupation of the shop stewards' movement with industrial organisation alone, and their contempt for "politics," meant that "we were carrying on a strike when we ought to have been making a revolution."<sup>1</sup> The strike was isolated by the national officials of the unions concerned (who also disciplined their local officials for supporting the movement) and ended in a fortnight.

Meantime the miners had prepared for battle. In January the M.F.G.B. resolved to demand a 30 per cent. wage increase, a six-hour working day, and nationalisation of the mines with a measure of workers' control. By 615,164 votes to 105,082 a ballot of all the coal-fields favoured strike action to secure these demands. Thus the Government—whose war-time control of the mines continued—found itself facing a miners' strike with exhausted coal stocks. Since the miners were in consultation with their railway and transport friends of the Triple Alliance, who had themselves tabled demands, it also faced the prospect of a general strike with revolutionary potentialities. Mr. Lloyd George bluffed brilliantly. He offered the miners a Royal Commission, pledging the Government to accept its recommendations, and on the other hand threatened that a strike would be suppressed by armed force. The M.F.G.B. leaders, particularly President Robert Smillie, recoiled from the threat—though in the circumstances of the time it was an absurdly empty one<sup>2</sup>—and persuaded the Federation conference by

<sup>1</sup> Wm. Gallacher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, p. 221.

<sup>2</sup> Hutt, *Post-War History of the British Working Class*, pp. 21-2.

a narrow majority to accept the Prime Minister's offer.

The Commission, presided over by Mr. Justice (later Lord) Sankey, afforded the opportunity for a detailed and documented exposure of coal capitalism, created a great sensation, and by a majority recommended nationalisation ; but the Government having, by this means and with a National Industrial Conference as a further safety-valve, tided over the moment of gravest crisis, coolly went back on its written pledge and refused to implement the Commission's recommendations. Indeed, they went further and allowed a piece of bureaucratic stupidity to provoke a stormy strike in the Yorkshire coalfield (July-August 1919).

During the summer the general industrial outlook continued thunderous, the largest movement being that of the Lancashire cotton operatives, 300,000 of whom struck in June for a 48-hour week and a 30 per cent. wage increase, which they successfully achieved. A second police strike, in July, was ruthlessly smashed, amid considerable tension. The next conflict to shake the entire nation, however, was that of the railwaymen in the autumn. It came at the end of many months of negotiations which the Government had deliberately dragged out and bore all the marks of a provocation intended to force the men into an unsuccessful struggle and thus create a breach in the trade union front. Mr. Lloyd George's denunciation of the strike as an "anarchist conspiracy," the violence of the Government-inspired Press barrage, the plan to starve the railwaymen and their families through discriminatory rationing, the sinister instructions to local authorities to enrol a "Citizen Guard," had a smell of civil war about them. Yet in one week the railwaymen won a resounding victory ; there

were to be no wage-cuts, as threatened, existing rates were stabilised and the lowest grade secured an advance.

The reasons for this signal success were noteworthy. First, there was 100 per cent. unity among the railwaymen themselves; the locomotive men were not bribed into blacklegging by the separate concession of their own demands. Second, the railwaymen had willing and powerful allies—in the Co-operative Movement, which granted large credits for strike pay, and in the Triple Alliance, whose leaders had difficulty in “restraining their own members from impetuous action in support of the railwaymen,”<sup>1</sup> while London newspaper printers threatened direct action unless the strikers’ case was fairly presented. Third, the aggressive and expert publicity conducted by the Labour Research Department, at the request of the N.U.R., was something never known in a major strike before (or since).<sup>2</sup>

Working-class opinion was profoundly stirred by this sensational repulse of a frontal attack with all the forces of the State; and it was only the conservative influence of Mr. J. H. Thomas and his colleagues which prevented the strike from spreading and becoming the starting point of a general forward movement. Subsequent gains were registered by other sections; thus the dockers in the spring of 1920 won wage increases from the inquiry headed by Lord Shaw, at which Mr. Ernest Bevin’s advocacy won him the title of the “Dockers’ K.C.” The miners, however, got no further, though their case was remitted to the T.U.C., discussed at the Congress in September 1919 and at two further special Congresses. A “Mines for the Nation” propaganda campaign had not moved the Government; and, after a proposal for a general

<sup>1</sup> Webb, *op. cit.*, p. 548.    <sup>2</sup> Hutt, *op. cit.*, pp. 25-9.

strike had been negatived by four to one, the issue was quietly dropped. In October 1920 the M.F.G.B. conducted a brief and inconclusive national strike for wage increases (the so-called *datum line* strike), significant because the Triple Alliance failed in its first actual test. Appealed to by the miners, the railway and transport union leaders fought shy of any sympathetic action, though their members favoured it (as a ballot of the railwaymen showed). This sign of weakness encouraged the Government to rush into law the notorious Emergency Powers Act, giving English naturalisation to that alien device the "state of siege."

Well might the Government clutch at new and exceptional powers ; for they had just had a startling demonstration of the political power of the trade union movement. It was in August 1920 that the long-continued British intervention against Socialist Russia threatened to become open war in support of the invading Poles and was finally stopped by the establishment of Councils of Action and the threat of an instant general strike. This historic achievement was the climax of a long campaign against intervention in which, among the unions, the Miners' Federation had played a leading part, and in which Mr. Herbert Morrison (for example) had told the 1919 Labour Party Conference :

They had got to realise that the present war against Russia on the part of this country, France and the other Imperialist Powers, was not war against Bolshevism or against Lenin, but against the international organisation of Socialism. It was a war against the organisation of the trade union movement itself, and as such should be resisted with the full political and industrial power of the whole trade union movement.

When the Poles, with British and French backing

made their unprovoked assault in the spring of 1920 it was the London dockers who electrified the whole movement by striking the *Jolly George*, one of many freighters who were loading munitions for Poland.<sup>1</sup> The *Jolly George* men had the support of the Dockers' Union, which at its national conference a week later decided, after a speech by Mr. Bevin exposing capitalist war intrigues, to put a general ban on the loading of munitions for use against Russia. In the first week of August came the threat of open war. Countrywide demonstrations of protest, organised by local Labour Parties and Trades Councils at the request of Labour Party headquarters, broke all records. Unity proved itself to be indeed strength; and between the trade unions and the Labour Party, and between every shade of opinion and every organisation in the movement, there was unity in those days.

On August 13th a delegate conference, called jointly by the T.U.C. and the Labour Party, met in London and endorsed with unanimity and enthusiasm the decision to establish a Council of Action to stop the war by "any and every form of withdrawal of labour." Mr. Bevin told the delegates that "this question you are called upon to decide to-day—the willingness to take any action to win world peace—transcends any claim in connection with wages or hours of labour." Mr. A. G. Cameron (Woodworkers), then Labour Party chairman, perhaps answering Mr. J. H. Thomas' claim that the decision "means a challenge to the whole Constitution of the country," declared that "Constitutionalism can only exist as long as it does not outrage the conscience of the community." If the Council had to act, he concluded, and

if the powers that be endeavour to interfere too much,

<sup>1</sup> The full story is told by Harry Pollitt, *Serving My Time*, pp. 111-21.

we may be compelled to do things that will cause them to abdicate, and to tell them that if they cannot run the country in a peaceful and humane manner without interfering with the lives of other nations, we will be compelled, even against all Constitutions, to chance whether we cannot do something to take the country into our own hands for our own people.

Those were indeed days when the battles fought by the trade union movement were of unexampled scope ; and it became clear that, like an army in the field, the Army of Labour could not win victories by sectional and isolated actions ; it must have a General Staff. To this end discussion was directed, immediately after and arising out of the railway strike, and a detailed report presented to the special Trades Union Congress which met in December 1919. The result of this was the transformation of the existing Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C., which had never been a genuine executive body, into the General Council, mandated by its Standing Orders to "promote common action by the trade union movement on general questions." Unfortunately the Council was left without the power to enforce decisions on the unions ; so the old sectionalism remained intact, and it could later be fairly said<sup>1</sup> that the General Councillors were "still in spirit representatives of their trades."

Warning of this possibility had come clearly from the Left at the beginning ; thus a Communist appeal to the delegates at the Cardiff T.U.C. in 1921 (when the General Council was first elected) suggested that the talk about a General Staff of Labour might amount to no more than "a new alliance of old leaders, who have already shown how incapable they are of really leading the workers against the Bastilles of capitalism.

<sup>1</sup> By Mr. Frank Hodges at the Southport T.U.C. (1922).

They will leave the old sectionalism of Labour intact, and this means the same old chaos and confusion hidden under a new and high-sounding name." It was urged that the T.U.C. should turn itself into a real Congress of Labour, based not on the unions alone but on a whole series of shop and works committees, grouped around the local Trades Councils.

Side by side with these developments there took place a series of amalgamations which transformed trade unionism. This was most marked in the field of transport and general labour. The grouping of the numerous unions of dockers and other transport workers in the Transport Workers' Federation gave place in 1921 to their fusion in the Transport and General Workers' Union. An ingenious structure—combining a high degree of centralisation with a double division of its members, vertically by industrial groups and horizontally by areas—enabled this powerful body to be substantially dominated by its forceful general secretary, Mr. Ernest Bevin. It subsequently absorbed the Workers' Union and became the largest single union in the country, concerned in scores of industries and sharing the general labour field with the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. The latter, lineal descendant of the Gasworkers' Union of 1889, drew into one the previously separate general labour unions. Between the two of them the T.G.W.U. and the N.U.G.M.W., with their vast card votes, were more and more to dominate the main decisions of the movement, alike at the T.U.C. and at Labour Party conferences.

Other important amalgamations took place in engineering, building, woollen textiles, iron and steel, clothing, the Civil Service (especially the Post Office) and the distributive trades. But they did not have



the same general significance nor did they thoroughly unify their industries. Thus the expansion of the old Amalgamated Society of Engineers into the Amalgamated Engineering Union in 1920, by the absorption of half a dozen of the leading craft unions in the industry, still left it honeycombed with smaller craft societies. Building provided a similar picture, even though the old Bricklayers and Stonemasons combined in the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers, and the two traditional unions of carpenters and joiners (the Amalgamated and the General Union) formed the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers ; however, the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives, founded in 1918, was to prove itself more effective as a co-ordinating body than the federations in other industries.

Industrial problems and policy were far from being the only concern of the trade unions during this period. On the political field their creation, the Labour Party, had in 1918 for the first time assumed the aspect of a definite party, with stated Socialist aims and programme, opening its ranks to individual membership and multiplying its local organisations from under 150 in 1914 to over 2,000 in 1920. But how were the anti-capitalist aims of the new programme, *Labour and the New Social Order*, to be achieved ? Or were they to be achieved at all ? The unions' aim was defined by the Webbs at this time as "the transformation of British politics and the supersession of the capitalist profit-maker." It seems self-evident that such an aim must impose a policy and outlook independent of, and fundamentally opposed to, that of the ruling class ; not one of dependence on, and accommodation to, the ruling class. Yet between these two opposing policies a battle royal developed. It began in the Labour Party,

and was fought between Mr. Ramsay MacDonald as the leader of those favouring the policy of accommodation, and the Communists as the most uncompromising representatives of the policy of independence and struggle.

This was the meaning of the long and bitter fight of MacDonaldism, and its heirs and successors in the movement, against the Communist Party, which had been founded in August 1920, and all who sympathised or associated in any way with it. Details of that significant struggle must be sought elsewhere<sup>1</sup>; here it will suffice to note that, from the foundation of the Party in August 1920 it met with marked support from trade union quarters in the initial stages of the fight. Thus it was the London Trades Council and the Miners' Federation that supported the affiliation of the C.P. to the Labour Party when it was first discussed (in 1921), and the Glasgow Trades and Labour Council that later intervened to bring together Communist Party representatives and the Labour Party Executive. And, while the affiliation proposal was rejected then and afterwards, it was noteworthy that in 1923 the Executive had to withdraw a clause aiming at the exclusion of Communists as trade union delegates to the Labour Party. Next year the Party conference saw the small minority favouring Communist affiliation leap to a substantial minority on the issue of banning Communists as Labour candidates, while on the proposal to exclude them from individual membership of the Party many big union votes swung against the Executive, which only carried its point by 1,804,000 votes to 1,540,000.

It is time to turn back to the end of 1920, when the brief post-war boom was coming to an end. Unemployment passed the million mark in February

<sup>1</sup> See Hutt, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-6, 71, 96-7, 119, 189-90.

1921 and the two million mark in June. The Council of Action had earlier been asked to include the steadily sharpening unemployment issue in its agitation, but had declared that this was not within its mandate. There followed a series of inconclusive inquiries and joint conferences of the Labour Party and T.U.C. No serious effort was made to test union opinion; the one large union which did so, the notably moderate Boot and Shoe Operatives, got a declaration from its members by ballot favouring a twenty-four hours' protest strike. This proposal the last of the joint conferences decisively defeated, confining itself to a general admonition to the unions to increase their Labour Party activity. Such a policy—or rather absence of one—turned unemployment from a potential source of strength into a source of weakness. By the end of 1921 those unions which paid unemployment benefit were bled white to the tune of some £7,000,000; and the unemployed had perforce organised themselves independently, establishing the National Unemployed Workers' Movement. In 1928 the T.U.C. agreed to set up a joint advisory council with the N.U.W.M., however, and some useful activity, including the drafting of an Unemployed Workers' Charter, was undertaken.

The onset of the tremendous slump of 1921 inevitably heralded a universal attack by the employers on wages and conditions. First to meet the capitalist offensive were the coalfields, for the double reason that mining was the hardest-hit industry and that the miners were the vanguard of the workers' army. The Government worked hand in glove with the coal-owners, suddenly advancing by five months the date on which its war-time control of the mines would end. On that date (March 31st, 1921) the miners were locked out, having rejected the owners' smashing

demands; these included a return from national to the old district agreements and wage-cuts so severe that they meant a return to a level below pre-war earnings (20 per cent. on the 1914 rate when the official cost-of-living index stood at 141 per cent. above 1914).

Clearly the issue involved far more than the fate of the miners. The M.F.G.B. invoked the aid of the Triple Alliance and the entire movement girded itself with enthusiasm and determination to meet what the *Daily Herald* called "a frontal attack on the whole working class by the capitalists and their Government." A general railway and transport strike was called for April 12th, and the advance response in all industrial centres was tremendous. Meantime the Government operated the new Emergency Powers Act, made an extensive display of military force and even enrolled a special corps, the Defence Force. This sabre-rattling was not surprising, since the pits had been closed down by the most complete stoppage they had ever known, even all the "safety men" being withdrawn. The M.F.G.B., too, was at the top of its strength and public opinion far from unsympathetic.

Unfortunately the enthusiasm outside found no reflection in the long and anxious colloquies of the Triple Alliance chiefs. On the very morning that the sympathetic strike was due they managed to get the miners and the Government in conference again, and the strike notices were postponed to April 15th, a Friday. By now the discussions of the Alliance leaders had become "chaotic and panicky," to quote Mr. G. D. H. Cole, one of the best-informed contemporary observers. An incident on Thursday night gave them their chance. Mr. Frank Hodges, secretary of the M.F.G.B., took it upon himself to offer a temporary "settlement" in an impromptu speech to an unofficial

meeting of M.P.s, who included influential Government supporters. Next morning he was very properly disowned and reprimanded by his Executive for unauthorised personal action in a matter of such moment. Taking this as their pretext (the miners, they claimed, had thus rejected the possibility of a settlement) the Alliance leaders threw in their hand. At 3 p.m. the bald announcement was made that the strike was off. That was "Black Friday."

The effect of this last-minute call-off throughout the movement was absolutely stunning. Bitter recriminations naturally followed, with cries of "betrayal" and gibes at the "Cripple Alliance." And of the four leading personalities associated with Black Friday three subsequently crossed over to the other side—Mr. Frank Hodges (director of the Bank of England), Mr. J. H. Thomas (who from the other side was constrained to go even further—out of public life), and the late Mr. Robert Williams of the Transport Workers' Federation, who after sinking into utter obscurity ended his days as a National Government propagandist. Number four was Mr. Ernest Bevin, who told the transport workers' conference in June 1921 that if he had to live Black Friday over again he would repeat his action. The collapse, he said, was due to lack of preparation and to the fact that each union was autonomous; he claimed that "there was also weakness among their own members."<sup>1</sup>

No one could dispute that the degree of actual preparation had not been on a par with the spontaneous response of the mass of trade unionists; and it was undeniable that sectionalism still prevailed. But Mr. Bevin's statement of these facts was accompanied by no acknowledgment that such matters are a responsibility of leadership; and his allegation

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Herald*, June 10th, 1921.

about the membership's weakness was a very unconvincing alibi. To quote Mr. G. D. H. Cole again : during the 1919-20 upsurge, the union leaders "took things easy, or busied themselves with small affairs, when they should have been straining every nerve to prepare for the coming struggle. The result was that the slump towards the end of 1920 took them altogether unprepared." So, in the crisis of April 1921, "conscious of their own helplessness and lack of ideas for dealing with the situation, and of the panic which was laying hold of them, they attributed helplessness and panic to the rank and file in an even higher degree."<sup>1</sup>

After Black Friday there remained nothing but a series of rearguard actions, stubbornly contested but unable to hold the employers' attack, which was pressed home throughout industry. The miners were defeated by June and by the end of 1921 wage-cuts averaging 8s. a week had been suffered by 6,000,000 workers. There was a general lockout of the cotton trade and, in 1922, in engineering, resulting in the employers once more securing absolute authority in all questions of "managerial functions," and draining dry the immense funds of the A.E.U., the union mainly concerned, in the process. The big post-war gains in union membership melted away. Between 1921 and 1923 affiliations to the T.U.C. dropped by over 2,000,000, more than the increase since 1918.

By the middle of 1923, however, there were signs of recovery. A series of strikes, many unofficial, included builders and agricultural workers in the Eastern Counties, seamen, boilermakers and dockers ; the last was, significantly, not defensive but demanded

<sup>1</sup> Cole, " ' Black Friday ' and After " (*Labour Monthly*, July 1921, p. 14). Mr. Cole there gave it as his view that the "mainly permanent trade union officials" of the Transport Workers "showed up worst."

wage increases and only ceased when the T. & G.W.U. agreed to set on foot a national wages movement. There was more than one factor combining to make this revived movement adopt a forward character. The dismal sectionalism exhibited at the 1923 T.U.C. (at Plymouth), a most petty display of inter-union squabbling, had a big effect among active rank-and-filers. It was followed by the experience of Mr. MacDonald's first Labour Government, which deeply disappointed many trade unionists, not excluding many leaders, and contributed to the growing leftward trend in the movement. That was hardly surprising when the Government's main claim in regard to its handling of strikes (to quote Mr. J. R. Clynes, one of its Ministers), was that it "played the part of a national Government and not a class Government."

When Mr. MacDonald and his friends took office in January 1924 a railway strike was in progress, the locomotivemen having rejected wage-cuts. The A.S.L.E.F. was conducting the strike, the N.U.R. (having accepted the cuts on behalf of its driver-members) keeping its men at work. The division naturally brought much bitterness; but eventually the locomotivemen secured some concessions, no thanks to the Government, which had hastened to tell the House of Commons that it "had no sympathy with this unofficial [*sic*] strike." A national strike of dockers in February was keenly and unitedly fought, securing some wage advances; but the Cabinet brought extreme pressure to bear on the leaders—"I wish it had been a Tory Government," mourned Mr. Bevin, "we would not have been frightened by their threats," while Mr. Ben Tillett said that he had never heard from Tory or Liberal Ministers "the same menacing tones or the same expressions of fear." But among the several disputes of that year, which

included unofficial strikes in the shipyards and the railway shops, and a national builders' lockout, the most significant was the London traffic strike in March. The tramwaymen struck for higher wages; the busmen joined them and the Tube men were considering sympathetic action. There was a clear strikebreaking ring about Mr. MacDonald's announcement that "the major services must be maintained, and the Government . . . must give protection to those engaged in legal occupations." That these were no idle words was seen in the Government's invoking of the Emergency Powers Act and proclamation of a State of Emergency; only the simultaneous end of the strike prevented the operation of the dictatorial measures thus prescribed.

It was important at this stage that the leftward-moving elements secured a centre in the National Minority Movement, launched at a conference in London in August 1924 with the veteran Tom Mann as its president and Harry Pollitt (Boilermakers)—who was gaining wide repute as a T.U.C. and Labour Party conference delegate and was a leading member of the Communist Party—as secretary.<sup>1</sup> This Movement had first taken root in the coalfields, where important districts (notably South Wales and Fife) had recorded support for the Red International of

<sup>1</sup> Pollitt stated the Minority Movement's aims in these terms: "We are not out to disrupt the unions, or to encourage any new unions. Our sole object is to unite the workers in the factories by the formation of factory committees; to work for the formation of one union for each industry; to strengthen the local Trades Councils so that they shall be representative of every phase of the working-class movement, with its roots firmly embedded in the factories of each locality. We stand for the creation of a real General Council that shall have the power to direct, unite and co-ordinate all the struggles and activities of the trade unions, and so make it possible to end the present chaos and go forward in a united attack in order to secure, not only our immediate demands, but to win complete workers' control of industry."



Labour Unions when it was founded at Moscow in the summer of 1921. A Miners' Minority Movement had developed during 1923, and was the backbone of the campaign which secured the election of the militant A. J. Cook as secretary of the M.F.G.B. upon the enforced resignation of Mr. Hodges.

On the eve of the Labour Government's defeat in the "Zinoviev Letter" election—the biggest electoral fraud in our history, for whose effectiveness Mr. MacDonald bore the main share of responsibility—there were sufficient signs of the influence being gained by the new trends. At the Hull T.U.C. in September 1924 the atmosphere was vastly different from the Plymouth Congress the previous year. Congress adopted an Industrial Workers' Charter, gave the General Council certain new powers of intervening in disputes, endorsed by a vote of nearly two to one the principle of organisation by industry, and instructed the General Council to draft a scheme for linking the unions in "a united front . . . for improving the standards of life of the workers." The Council was likewise instructed "to call a special Congress to decide on industrial action immediately there is danger of war."

The Hull Congress made news, also, in being the first to receive a delegation from the Soviet trade unions; and it was decided to reciprocate by the dispatch of a T.U.C. delegation to the U.S.S.R. To the problem of international trade union unity attention was similarly paid. In June of that year, at the Vienna Congress of the International Federation of Trade Unions, the British delegates had succeeded in keeping the door open for negotiations with the Soviet trade unions when the Social-Democratic majority wished to shut it tight. Of this endeavour the Hull

T.U.C. approved; and unanimous agreement was accorded to the statement of the president, the late Mr. A. A. Purcell, that the General Council should be empowered "to take all possible steps . . . in bringing together the different elements of the Labour movement in Europe."

## CHAPTER 8 : THE GENERAL STRIKE AND AFTER (1925-9)

DURING 1925 it was made clear, first, that the new leftward trend in the unions was gaining ground at a rapid pace, and, second, that even more than before the coalfields were to be the cockpit of a key struggle. The urge for trade union unity, national and international, which found expression at the Hull T.U.C., developed most dramatically in the international sphere. On the General Council a "left" group developed, headed by the late Mr. A. A. Purcell and Mr. George Hicks (Building Trade Workers); under their influence the Council took the lead in a prolonged campaign to induce the Amsterdam diehards at least to meet the Moscow International and discuss the possibilities of unity. In this matter a friendly understanding with the Soviet trade unions was initiated when the T.U.C. delegation visited the U.S.S.R. at the end of 1924, and an Anglo-Russian Joint Advisory Council later set up. These activities, and especially the notable Report of the delegation (recording how "in Russia the workers are the ruling class"), brought down upon the General Council the most incredible explosion of spleen, calumny and misrepresentation from the united forces of Continental Social-Democracy and the British ruling class. The late Mr. Fred Bramley, then general secretary of the T.U.C., summed

up the Amsterdam attitude in a memorable passage :

It appears to me you can discuss any other subject under the sun without getting into that panicky state of trembling fear and excitement and almost savage ferocity which you get into when you are discussing Russian affairs. . . . You can discuss the activities of capitalist Governments, and their destruction of the trade union movement in one country after another without this unnecessary epidemic of excitement ; but when you begin to discuss Russia, you begin to suffer from some malignant disease. . . . Get rid of the panicky fear that seems to invade and dominate your minds in dealing with Russia.<sup>1</sup>

But the I.F.T.U. leaders never budged, and in the event the General Council did not take the promised further step of itself calling an international unity conference.

As for the coal industry, its economic situation was so serious that it was described as "heading for irretrievable disaster." The temporary fillip afforded in 1923-4 by the French occupation of the Ruhr had passed and the owners now came forward with new demands for drastic wage-cuts, the abolition of the principle of a minimum wage and a complete reversion to district agreements. Nor were the miners the only objects of attack. British capitalism faced a desperate struggle to patch up its economy and re-establish its world position. Prime Minister Baldwin put it bluntly when he said "all the workers of this country have got to take reductions in wages to help put industry on its feet."<sup>2</sup>

The M.F.G.B. rejected the owners' demands and received the "complete support" of the T.U.C.

<sup>1</sup> Speech at the I.F.T.U. General Council meeting, Amsterdam, February 5th-7th, 1925.

<sup>2</sup> *Daily Herald*, July 31st, 1925.

General Council, which appointed a Special Committee to co-operate with the miners in concerting resistance. The Committee, assured of support by the executives of the railway and transport unions, drew up plans for an embargo on all coal transport in the event of a miners' lockout. Detailed instructions were there-upon issued to all the unions concerned, and given "unanimous and enthusiastic approval" by a special conference of trade union executives which met on July 30th, the day before the owners' notices were due to expire. The Government, unprepared for such a development, beat a hasty retreat. Eating its own words, it announced a nine months' subsidy to enable a Royal Commission to make a detailed inquiry. The owners withdrew their notices and the day passed into history as Red Friday.

This defeat for the Government was naturally an "immense stimulus to every trade unionist," as the General Council declared, adding the vital rider that vigilance and "devising ways and means" to meet a further attack was essential. That view was universally held. "This is the first round," Mr. A. J. Cook summed it up, "Let us prepare for the final struggle." Behind this "unstable truce," said the Communists, "the capitalist class will prepare for a crushing attack upon the workers," and if the workers "do not make effective counter-preparations then they are doomed to shattering defeat." On the Government side preparations were immediate and thorough. Mr. Winston Churchill (Chancellor of the Exchequer), now as before the Cabinet's most open class warrior, made it plain that he and his colleagues on Red Friday had merely decided "to postpone the crisis" with a view to "coping effectually with it when the time comes." The Government was as good as Mr. Churchill's word. Official support was given

to the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, a volunteer strike-breaking organisation. Blackleg "shock troops" were given technical training. An entire dictatorial apparatus, placing all power in the hands of ten ministerial Commissioners, was erected. Like an army going over the top, it was arranged that this machine should operate instantly on the receipt of an "action" signal from Whitehall.

Astonishing though it must seem, no counter-preparations at all were undertaken on the trade union side. Despite the initial warnings, there gained currency what the principal orthodox historian of the General Strike, Professor Crook, has called a "studied attitude of unpreparedness" which "had results upon the Labour forces in the actual struggle that were nothing short of disastrous." "Even if the experience of the long organisation of the Belgian Labour Party for its general strike in 1913 had not been utilised by the British leaders [he concludes], common sense should have dictated some modicum of preparation." <sup>1</sup>

For this surprising lapse the reason lay in the relation of forces within the leadership. That the spirit of the movement itself was fighting fit, the Scarborough T.U.C. spectacularly demonstrated in September 1925. It was indeed a demonstrative Congress, from the loudly acclaimed presidential address in which Mr. A. B. Swales (A.E.U.) plumped for "a militant and progressive policy, consistently and steadily pursued," to the smashing vote of 8,082,000 to 79,000 in favour of revolutionary opposition to British imperialism. Decisively Congress declared that the aim of the unions was to struggle "in conjunction with the Party of the workers . . . for the overthrow of capitalism," pledged itself "to

<sup>1</sup> Wilfrid H. Crook, *The General Strike*, p. 389.

develop and strengthen workshop organisation," endorsed the General Council's international unity campaign, and condemned the Dawes Plan for the more efficient squeezing of the German people (principal product of Mr. MacDonald's Government). But when it came to deeds rather than words the picture was not so rosy. The affiliation of the Trades Councils to Congress was ruled out of order, the key issue of the General Council's powers was shelved again, and two of the men of Black Friday were elected to the General Council. They were Mr. J. H. Thomas and Mr. Ernest Bevin; the latter, with his hold on his powerful union consolidated, now for the first time moving into T.U.C. leadership. To reinforce them there came, with the untimely death of Mr. Fred Bramley shortly after Scarborough, the accession to the General Council secretaryship of the assistant secretary, Mr. W. M. Citrine (as he then was), a dark horse who rapidly proved himself of a very different colour from his sturdily independent predecessor.

The balance of forces on the General Council had thus been sharply redressed in favour of the Right, hamstringing (as it turned out) the fair-weather "lefts" of the Purcell-Hicks group. The following month, also, Mr. Thomas and Mr. Bevin associated with Mr. MacDonald in making the Liverpool conference of the Labour Party a counter-demonstration to Scarborough. The fight against the Communists was now carried into the unions, which were urged to refrain from electing Communist delegates to the Labour Party. In place of the "new social order" of 1918 the Party programme was watered down to "a co-ordinated policy of National Reconstruction and Reform." As chairman the late Mr. C. T. Cramp (Mr. Thomas' associate in the leadership of the N.U.R.) proclaimed that "we transcend the conflict of

classes." It was all an unmistakable signal. Within a fortnight the Government swooped upon the Communist apostles of preparedness, and twelve C.P. leaders were gaoled after the biggest State trial since Chartist days. At the beginning of November the efforts of the now thoroughly uneasy Miners' Federation to form an Industrial Alliance of key unions and thus prepare for The Day were wrecked by the withdrawal of Mr. Thomas's N.U.R.<sup>1</sup>

During these months the Royal Commission on the coal industry, headed by Sir Herbert (later Lord) Samuel, was at work, treading well-worn paths, and producing in March 1926 a Report which was vague in its references to State intervention for the reorganising of coal capitalism, but precise in its assertions that the miners should accept longer hours or lower wages. The effect of the Samuel Report was to divide the movement, at least at the top. The General Council were henceforth essentially persuaded that the miners should accept wage reductions on condition that the industry was "reorganised," and felt that the M.F.G.B. line "not a penny off the pay, not a second on the day" was (as they later cynically averred) "a mere slogan." Undeterred by signs of weakening on the Council's part the miners' delegate conference on April 10th stood firm; they had had evidence that masses of trade unionists did not share the General Council's defeatist view when the Minority Movement broke records at a Conference of Action it held towards the end of March, attended by 883 delegates representing close on 1,000,000 trade unionists. The coalowners immediately disclosed their hand, announcing their intention to proceed with negotiations on a district basis only, and posting lockout notices for April 20th, demanding wage

<sup>1</sup> Hutt, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-2.



reductions so sweeping that even their president, Mr. Evan Williams, admitted the resulting wage would be "miserable."

The owners' bellicosity hardened the General Council's attitude again in support of the miners. On April 27th it decided for the first time to draft plans for the large-scale action that circumstances might impose. Executives of unions affiliated to the T.U.C. were summoned to confer in London two days later. But the opening statement of that conference showed that the General Council were still bemused by the Samuel Report—Chairman Arthur Pugh urged that the owners and the miners should have started negotiations with the Report as a basis—even while they repeated their assurances of apparently unqualified support for the miners. This contradiction was not openly resolved and was to prove fatal. Indeed it is more than doubtful whether the General Council would have launched the mighty movement that it did, if the Government had not forced the pace. The intricate and abortive negotiations which occupied the night of April 29th, and the following day and night till after 11 o'clock, made it clear that the Government, all its preparations completed, stood solid with the coalowners, was seeking to manipulate the Press against the miners, and in all respects was determined on provoking a conflict.

It was nearing midnight when this news was conveyed to an angry and excited conference by the General Council's negotiators (the so-called Industrial Committee, of which Mr. Thomas was a leading member). The Executives dispersed till the morning bearing with them a memorandum which was in fact the General Strike order. On reassembly the vote was taken. The strike order was dramatically endorsed by unions representing over 3,600,000 members

against a handful representing less than 50,000. It was announced that the trades specified would strike as from midnight on Monday, May 3rd. Upstanding, the conference sang the "Red Flag" and dispersed to May Day demonstrations exalted by the call to arms.

The strike order specified a call-out in two "grades" or "lines." The first line comprised transport (all forms), printing (including the newspapers), "productive industries" (itemised as iron and steel, metal and heavy chemicals), building (with the exception of housing and hospitals). Leading the second line was engineering and shipbuilding. The maintenance of food and health services was to be undertaken by the unions. The individual unions concerned were asked to "place their powers in the hands of the General Council," but the actual calling out on strike was left to them (and as they numbered eighty-two a great deal of sectional confusion resulted). Finally, the General Council directed that "in the event of any action being taken and trade union agreements being placed in jeopardy, it be definitely agreed that there will be no general resumption of work until those agreements are fully recognised."

In the excitement of the moment few appreciated that the fatal contradiction already mentioned still subsisted. And now the General Council, having assumed direction of the entire struggle, considered that it was empowered to settle on the miners' behalf even if that involved wage reductions. The M.F.G.B., on the other hand, held that their only authorisation to the General Council was to act for them on the basis of the repeated declarations of solidarity in resisting any reduction whatever in their living standards. They certainly protested vehemently against the Industrial Committee's reopening of negotiations

with the Government within a few hours of the strike decision and the dispersal of the Miners' Executive to their districts. Those negotiations, whose complicated course occupied the entire week-end, boiled down to the old point—acceptance of the Samuel Report, implying wage reductions. Eventually agreement appeared to have been reached on this, and it only remained for the General Council to confront the M.F.G.B. Executive, hastily recalled by telegram, with a *fait accompli*.

At this stage a violent change was effected by the sudden strike of printing staffs at the *Daily Mail*, with the Natsopa men in the lead, as a result of a blood-and-thunder anti-union leading article. Mr. Baldwin instantly told the General Council negotiators that the Government regarded this as an "overt act" of war, and demanded the unconditional withdrawal of the General Strike notices if negotiations were to continue. He thereupon retired to bed, and when the General Council dispatched a repudiation of the *Daily Mail* men to Downing Street the door was (literally) shut in their face. Thus at last "the T.U.C. stood as a combatant in a war which had been forced upon it and which it feared to win."<sup>1</sup> And which it feared even more that the strikers, the working class, might win in a revolutionary fashion, as subsequent statements by Mr. Bevin, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Charles Dukes (General Workers) made clear.<sup>2</sup>

That it had a defeatist General Staff hardly entered the minds of the millions-strong army which went over the top with incomparable *élan* at midnight on Monday, May 3rd. Next day the T.U.C. communiqué said: "We have from all over the country reports that have surpassed all our expectations. Not only

<sup>1</sup> Kingsley Martin, *The British Public and the General Strike*, p. 58.

<sup>2</sup> Hutt, *op. cit.*, pp. 134-5.

the railwaymen and transport men, but all other trades came out in a manner we did not expect immediately. The difficulty of the General Council has been to keep men in what we might call the second line of defence rather than call them out." Nor in the apocalyptic Nine Days that followed was there ever any appreciable weakening of the strike; the Government propaganda was entirely at variance with its own confidential reports. Indeed, as the second week opened the strike was developing and deepening, so far as the masses were concerned. The local Councils of Action had consolidated, mass picketing, defence corps, local propaganda through a myriad of duplicated bulletins, were well in their stride. Despite the General Council's anxious protestations that the strike was only an industrial dispute ("We beg Mr. Baldwin to believe that") it was obviously assuming an ever sharper political character.

From the start the General Council remained on the defensive, allowing the opposing forces to take every initiative. It did not produce its own organ, the *British Worker*, until the Government had established the official *British Gazette*<sup>1</sup> with Mr. Churchill—the Cabinet's real War Lord in this struggle—as super-editor of a sheet summed up in its description of the strikers as "the enemy"; and the *British Worker* was kept in leading-strings by a General Council censorship as timorous as it was strict. Never was there any carrying of the war into the enemy's camp; the lessons of the 1919 railway strike publicity appeared completely forgotten. Yet the Government's provocative actions—the array of military force, the suppression of conciliatory moves

<sup>1</sup> With vital aid from Lord Beaverbrook who, since the Government could not obtain a single blackleg linotype operator, loaned one of the mechanical chiefs of the *Express*.

on its own side, the playing up of Sir John Simon's laughably bad legal threats, the orgy of police batoning, wholesale arrests and gaolings on the flimsiest pretexts—were enough to show that its position was far from being as strong as its propaganda ceaselessly and loudly pretended.

By the end of the first week, in fact, the General Council's attention was concentrated, not on leading the strike, but on negotiations to end it. "It seemed," wrote Mr. A. J. Cook, "that the only desire of some leaders was to call off the General Strike at any cost, without any guarantees for the workers, miners or others." That is exactly what happened; except that it was not some leaders, but the whole General Council, including the Purcell-Hicks "lefts." The thing was done on the basis of a Memorandum prepared by Sir Herbert Samuel, rehashing his Commission's Report. This, though Sir Herbert made it clear that he could give no assurances on the Government's behalf, the General Council unanimously endorsed, and, without having received any guarantees of any kind decided, against the declared opposition of the M.F.G.B., to terminate the strike.

On Wednesday morning, May 12th, the Council accordingly waited on the Prime Minister and, in a humiliating scene, announced their unconditional capitulation. Such was their pitiable confusion that the "second line" had been called out, according to plan, only a few hours before; such their wishful thinking that some among them actually sent "victory" circulars to their members; such their sense of guilt that the *British Worker* utterly suppressed the M.F.G.B. repudiation of the call-off and even sought to suggest that the miners were in agreement with the Council. Immediately the employers struck, as the Government intended they should do,

"determined if possible to impose non-unionism, reduced wages or servile conditions."<sup>1</sup> But the strikers remained solid; and the soldiers' battle of Thursday, May 13th, magnificently saved the surrender from becoming a debacle, even though the new agreements were very unfavourable and opened the door to much victimisation.

The Nine Days, and even more the days of the rear-guard action that followed them, had made the working class feel its own power, had taught what unity and a fighting spirit could do, had "proved conclusively," as Mr. A. J. Cook wrote, "that the Labour movement has the men and women that are capable in an emergency of providing the means of carrying on the country." It taught the leaders something too; but that was summed up in Mr. C. T. Cramp's public ejaculation "Never Again!" No doubt they felt that in those days of May they had gazed too closely at what the late Mr. Arthur Henderson subsequently called the "terrible prospect" of a collapse of the present social and political order. Not for nothing had they passed the historic turning-point of 1914, that fusion of the trade unions with the State machine which has been described in an earlier chapter. Henceforth they were not to stray from the path of accommodation to, and collaboration with, the régime of monopoly capital.

It took some time for this policy in its new form to come to fruition. The General Strike was over by the middle of May, but the miners remained stubbornly in the field till December, even at the very end rejecting surrender, which now involved the loss of the seven-hour day as well as wage cuts, by 480,000 votes to 818,000. Their ranks had been thinned by breakaways, notably in the Midlands, where Mr. G. A. Spencer,

<sup>1</sup> *The Scottish Worker*, May 14th, 1926.

leader of the Notts Miners' Association, formed a "Non-Political" union with the support of the coalowners that was to bedevil those coalfields for years. The T.U.C. General Council and their colleagues on the Labour Party Executive damped down the still universal solidarity with the miners that was expressed in the widespread union demand for a levy on all trade unionists and an embargo on coal imports. Danger in this respect was also avoided by the postponement of the Conference of Executives to discuss the General Strike (promised for the end of June), and the singular banning of the subject at the Bournemouth T.U.C. in September. When the Conference finally met, in January 1927, it turned out according to plan—a formal inquest which returned the required verdict.

Given this outcome of the General Strike it was not surprising that the Government was able to press through, against only a platform campaign from the General Council, its central legal attack on trade unionism. In 1927 the Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act (the "Blacklegs' Charter") was placed on the Statute Book. Not only general strikes but sympathetic strikes, even when purely industrial in aim, were made illegal. A clause without precedent suggested that it might be a criminal offence for persons not actually in employment to refuse to accept employment on an employer's terms. Anyone leading or participating in an "illegal" strike was liable to fine or imprisonment (up to two years, on indictment), while union funds were made liable for civil damages, thus removing the immunity conferred by the Act of 1906. Mass picketing was forbidden and ordinary picketing hamstrung by a blanket definition of "intimidation." Civil Service unions were forbidden to affiliate to the T.U.C. or the Labour Party. Trade

unionists who blacklegged were protected against any disciplinary action by their unions. A blow was struck at the unions' political activity by changing the existing legal arrangements regarding political levies. Instead of objectors to the political levy having to "contract-out," its supporters now had to "contract-in." The Act was appropriately summed up as "the most reactionary sample of British labour legislation placed on the statute book since the evil Combination Laws of 1799-1800 . . . a crudely framed piece of restrictive class legislation."<sup>1</sup>

Little over a month after the enactment of this law for the disarming of the trade union movement, the presidential address to the Edinburgh T.U.C. offered to co-operate with the employers "in a common endeavour to improve the efficiency of industry and to raise the workers' standard of life." It was pronounced by Mr. George Hicks, former leading figure of the General Council "lefts." In November this invitation was taken up by a group of twenty leading industrialists headed by the late Lord Melchett (then Sir Alfred Mond), founder of the mammoth Imperial Chemical Industries combine. In January 1928 the first joint meeting between this group and the General Council took place. "Mondism" was born, its lone opponent on the General Council being Mr. A. J. Cook.

Reporting to the Swansea T.U.C. in September 1928 the General Council outlined three possible policies for trade unionism. The policy of militant working-class struggle it dismissed as "futile, certain to fail, and sure to lead to bloodshed and misery." The orthodox policy of letting the employers run industry while the unions fought for their members' rights and interests was disposed of as "inconsistent

<sup>1</sup> Wilfrid H. Crook, *op. cit.*, pp. 481, 484.



with the modern demand for a completely altered status of the workers in industry." Policy number three (approved) was "for the trade union movement to say boldly that not only is it concerned with the prosperity of industry, but that it is going to have a voice in the way industry is carried on . . . the unions can use their power to promote and guide the scientific reorganisation of industry." What that approved policy meant had been suggested in the first joint report of the General Council and the Mond group. This declared that the tendency to rationalisation and trustification "should be welcomed and encouraged." It proposed the establishment of a National Industrial Council, representing the General Council and the employers (through their National Confederation and the Federation of British Industries), and under which a system of compulsory conciliation was to be operated. In return the employers conceded a species of union recognition which looked like the universalising of the ingenious system of disguised company unionism devised by the late Mr. Havelock Wilson to the greater profit of the shipowners and the easier exploitation of the seamen. Involving, as Mr. E. Shinwell, M.P., put it, the "blunt bargain" whereby "the trade union keeps the men in order; the employer in return agrees to employ union men only."

It soon transpired that the policy of peace with the employers meant war within the unions. There was a substantial body of union opinion opposed to Mondism, rallying 768,000 votes at the Swansea T.U.C. against a majority of 2,920,000; and the General Council did not appear to have very convincing arguments to offer, Mr. Bevin booming at the anti-Mondists at the Belfast T.U.C. in 1929 that he "objected to the inferiority complex." Strong arm methods were

therefore resorted to. Already in 1926 the Bournemouth Congress had carried the General Council's appeal to Trades Councils not to affiliate to the Minority Movement; the Council's spokesman, Mr. A. Conley (Garment Workers) naïvely remarking that "if the Council had agreed to this affiliation, within a short time the Minority Movement would become the majority."<sup>1</sup> The National Union of General and Municipal Workers led the way in reviving the old employers' weapon of the "document" to exclude Communists or Minority Movement supporters from office. Their example was in varying degree followed by the Railwaymen, Transport Workers, Shop Assistants, Natsopa, Electrical Trades, Boot and Shoe Operatives, Bakers, Painters and Boilermakers (the last aimed directly at Harry Pollitt). Most sensational of all was the splitting of the Scottish Miners' Union in 1927-8 by the old officials, when duly and constitutionally voted out by their members in favour of Communists and men of the left<sup>2</sup>; the chaos thus induced eventually compelled the militants to establish for a time a new union, the United Mineworkers of Scotland.

The meaning of Mondism was not long in making itself clear. Throughout industry conditions worsened, with extensive speeding-up, breaking of piece-rates, violating of agreements. The railwaymen suffered a wage-cut and the misery in the coalfields was intense, the average miners' wage being only 30 per cent. over 1914 level, with the cost-of-living index 67 per cent. over 1914. Union membership shrank, T.U.C. affiliations declining by half a million between 1926-8. But with the opening months of 1929 a new tide of revolt

<sup>1</sup> *Daily Herald*, September 8th, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Details of these remarkable proceedings are given in Hutt, *op. cit.*, pp. 188-7.

was beginning to rise, seen in keenly-fought local strikes typified by the ten weeks' struggle of the girls at the Rego clothing factory in London for union recognition, and the fifteen weeks' fight of the 8,000 miners at Dawdon (Durham) against a heavy wage-cut.

## CHAPTER 9 : THE ROAD TO CATASTROPHE (1930-9)

MONDISM, it has to be emphasised, was not the personal and temporary deviation of union leaders on the rebound from the General Strike. It was the expression of a consistent and continuous policy ; the dominant policy of the movement's top leadership throughout the final pre-war decade, as in the years immediately preceding. The specific proposals and character of Mondism have been touched on in the previous chapter. Here it may be well to analyse in more detail the essential nature of the policy, since that will provide a key to the period now to be reviewed. For this it is only necessary to refer to what we may call Sir Walter Citrine's introduction to Mondism, written at the close of 1927, before the conversations of the General Council with Lord Melchett's group had actually begun.<sup>1</sup>

This programmatic statement outlined, almost in the same words, subsequent General Council pronouncements ; for example, in the description of the three alternative policies facing trade unionism and in the development of the old Whitley proposals for a National Industrial Council and joint councils in each industry. Getting down to bedrock, the statement stressed that a turning-point had been reached, and

<sup>1</sup> W. M. Citrine, article in *Manchester Guardian Industrial Relations Supplement*, November 30th, 1927 ; quoted in W. Milne-Bailey, *Trade Union Documents*, pp. 431-8.

that "the next stage in the evolution of trade unionism" connoted two things. First, any policy of struggle against, or opposition to, large-scale modern capitalism must be rejected ("the approach to a new industrial order is not by way of a social explosion;" the aim should be "an effective relationship which will ensure greater stability and harmony in industry"). Second, trade unions as the monopolists of labour ("trade unionism . . . has established a virtually unchallenged control of the organised power of the workers") must enter into partnership with the monopolists of capital, the aim being "a concerted effort to raise industry to its highest efficiency." Making Mr. Bevin's thunderings against "inferiority complex" sound most paradoxical,<sup>1</sup> it was plainly suggested that in this partnership the unions would play the junior rôle; all they hoped for was "a larger share of control in directing industrial changes," while for their members they would only ask "an equitable share in the gains resulting from increased productivity."

An old fallacy was re-furbished in the suggestion that increased production was the gateway to working-class prosperity ("promoting the largest possible output so as to provide a rising standard of life and continuously improving conditions of employment"). Rationalisation of industry was viewed not as a process of intensification of labour through speed-up, mechanisation, etc., but as "a more efficient, economical and humane system of production." While Taylorism, for instance, might produce an "inevitable psychological reaction" if "autocratically introduced without consultation" with the union officials, all would be well given the desired partnership of the organised employers and the union apparatus. Then

<sup>1</sup> See p. 116 above.

there would be "numerous possibilities of mutual agreement . . . in the application of the principles of scientific management." At the same time, the unions "will not be afraid to face" the "reciprocal responsibility" of such alleged restrictions on production as "ca' canny," demarcation disputes, existing union rules and customs; and, in conclusion, the old objections to profit-sharing and employee-shareholding schemes might disappear if they were operated "on a collectivist basis with the union acting as steward and trustee."

In so propounding the complete integration of the union machine with that of capitalist industry in the interests of "highest efficiency" and "gains from increased productivity," Sir Walter Citrine was no isolated extremist. The policy he enunciated so clearly was acceptable to the majority of the T.U.C. General Council, first and foremost to their leading member, Mr. Ernest Bevin, autocrat of the Transport and General Workers' Union. And in operating along these lines leaders were able to take advantage of the marked change in the composition of the T.U.C. which became evident during the 1930's; the affiliated membership of the miners, engineers, textile workers (for instance) had greatly declined, while the T. & G.W.U. was now the biggest single union, with the other big general union, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, third in the Congress list.<sup>1</sup> The block vote of these two unions gave the Citrine policy massive backing. Nor was this limited to Mondism as an economic policy; both unions

<sup>1</sup> Memberships were: T. & G.W.U. 523,000, N.U.G.M.W. 340,000, Mineworkers' Federation 518,000, National Union of Railwaymen 338,000, Amalgamated Engineering Union 250,000 (figures for 1936). Subsequent changes have emphasised this position, summed up in the fact that while the M.F.G.B.'s 1940 figure was 590,000, the T. & G.W.U. had risen to 650,000.

mentioned had a high proportion of members "contracting-in" to the Labour Party (T. & G.W.U. 801,000, N.U.G.M.W. 242,000); thus there was vote-fodder for the projection of Mondism on to the wider plane of politics which became a feature of the period.<sup>1</sup>

This feature was the accompaniment and sequel to the final playing-out of the tragi-comical farce of MacDonaldism in the Second Labour Government. The Labour Party won the General Election of 1929—or rather the Conservatives lost it—on the crest of a wave of working-class resentment against the Baldwin Government, legacy of the General Strike, the crushing of the miners and the passing of the punitive Trade Union Act. But it was soon seen that the new Government represented a retrogression even on its predecessor of 1924. It "cringed before the rich man's frown" and showed not the slightest desire to protect the standards of those whom Mr. MacDonald pleasantly called the "eazy-oozy asses." Election pledges were not honoured; the seven-hour day was not restored to the miners, who instead were driven to strike in Scotland, and were locked out in South Wales, through disputes provoked by the Government's prescription of an hours' spreadover; the Trade Union Act was not repealed, the Government prevaricating so shamelessly that Mr. Bevin was driven to protest. In a series of big textile disputes the Government intervened with arbitration or court of inquiry proceedings which awarded wage

<sup>1</sup> Of this an important example was the transfer of the *Daily Herald* in 1930 to the millionaire newspaper concern of Odhams Press, giving them a majority share control (51 per cent), while retaining the joint T.U.C. and Labour Party representation on the *Herald* board, Mr. Bevin being the principal figure and the leading defender of Lord Southwood's daily in face of the criticism which was voiced at later Trades Union Congresses.

cuts; this occurred in the cotton spinning lockout of 1929 and the woollen lockout of 1930, the latter case being rendered more scandalous by the police violence employed in the West Riding during a dogged two months' fight. In 1931 the Lancashire weavers were locked out to enforce the masters' more-loom-per-weaver demand. Though their leaders were uncertain, the weavers stood solid and won; one of the delegation which the locked-out weavers dispatched to London to voice their case put it bluntly, "Lancashire weavers," he<sup>1</sup> said, "were having to fight, not merely the employers, but their own Central Committee and the Labour Government itself." With the surging flood of unemployment that followed the onset of the world economic crisis the Government proved itself totally incapable of dealing, save by proposing "economies" at the expense of the unemployed and the working class in general.

Meantime the General Council had continued its Mondist explorations, though the full organisational plans were not then realised. The Federation of British Industries and the National Confederation of Employers' Organisations conferred with the General Council to examine methods of co-operation, but the proposed National Industrial Council did not materialise. However, the F.B.I. and the General Council prepared a joint memorandum for the Imperial Conference of 1930, a significant document which broke with the traditional policy of free trade, urging tariffs and an Empire economic bloc. The open imperialism of this memorandum was reflected in its narrow endorsement at the Nottingham T.U.C. (by 1,878,000 votes to 1,401,000) after a debate in which Mr. Bevin's key speech in favour was noteworthy for

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Zeph Hutchinson, secretary of the Bacup Weavers' Association.



its anti-Soviet passages.<sup>1</sup> Next year the character of the T.U.C.'s new associates was illuminated in a vehement attack made by the National Confederation on unemployment insurance.

Contrasting with this attitude at the top were signs of militant tendencies at the bottom. Thus 2,000 delegates attended a conference organised by the Manchester Trades Council in May 1931, resolving to demand a 40-hour week and pledging resistance to all wage-cuts and attacks on social services. The previous month a Convention met in London to endorse the Workers' Charter launched by the Minority Movement (a simple programme embodying demands for increased unemployment benefit, extended social services, a 7-hour day and a minimum wage of £3 a week); here, however, the drive against the militants in the unions left its mark, for of the near 800 delegates little more than one-sixth were representative trade unionists.

These symptoms in no way deterred the General Council. Nor was it turned from its path by the crash of the Labour Government in August 1931 and the defection of MacDonald, Thomas and Snowden to the new Tory-dominated "National" Government. There was, indeed, a radical contradiction in the protests at this inevitable end of MacDonaldism that arose among the union High Command; for, as Mr. Ellis Smith (Patternmakers, now M.P. for Stoke) pointedly asked the Bristol T.U.C. in September 1931, how could they "condemn MacDonald, Snowden and Thomas for collaborating with opposed political parties when the General Council did the same thing

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Bevin attacked what he called Soviet "dumping," declared (quite contrary to commercial experience) that Russian trade "is very often only 10 per cent. orders and 90 per cent. propaganda," and averred that the Soviet "Empire" had an "attitude to subject races very much the same" as that of other Empires.

in the industrial field " ? Or was there really such a contradiction ? It did not appear that there was an objection in principle to the kind of coalition that the MacDonaldites had entered. That same Congress heard, without critical reaction, the late Mr. Arthur Henderson declare that he " would have preferred that the idea of a National Government had been seriously considered and approached in a proper way, and that the Labour movement should have been consulted, preferably at a specially convened Labour conference." And while the movement as a whole admirably withstood the shock of the defection, its " break with MacDonaldism," as Mr. G. D. H. Cole wrote at the time, " was far more instinctive than rational."<sup>1</sup> Nor did the leadership ever seek to make that break " rational " (that is, conscious, reasoned) ; instead, as suggested above, they projected the Mondist policy on to the political plane and thereby constituted themselves the heirs, administrators and assigns of MacDonaldism. The new feature was that henceforth the central political direction of the movement was in the hands, not of the Labour Party leaders who remained, but of the small group at the head of the T.U.C. General Council.

While the " National " Government in its several modifications pursued from 1931 onwards the path of reaction at home and abroad, sapping popular liberties and standards of life on the one hand and making war inevitable on the other, there was henceforth at no point a concerted and united resistance to it from the Labour leadership. With the single exception of cotton, there were to be no more large-scale official strikes or co-ordinated forward movements. The initial fight against the " economy " cuts, the pro-

<sup>1</sup> Cole, *Short History of the British Working-Class Movement* (1982 edition), Foreword, p. x.

longed struggle of the unemployed against the slashing of benefits and the Means Test, remained a soldiers' war. Where the struggle was not spontaneous (as was the mutiny of the Atlantic Fleet at Invergordon) it was aided and directed by the officially outlawed Communists or their friends on the left. The incessant unemployed demonstrations, Hunger Marches, battles with the police of those days, were led by the National Unemployed Workers' Movement.

The unemployed issue showed how the Mondist politicians were carrying on the MacDonaldite tradition of disruption and heresy-hunting. In the first year of reaction after the General Strike the General Council had terminated its relations with the N.U.W.M.; in 1932, at the height of the unemployed agitation, it went further and urged Trades Councils to set up their own local unemployed associations. The several National Hunger Marches were ostracised, though rank-and-file union support could not be stayed; the March of 1932, for instance, was welcomed by a crowd of 100,000 in Hyde Park and on the following Sunday drew 150,000 to Trafalgar Square.<sup>1</sup> But unemployed deputations to the T.U.C., which were annually organised by the N.U.W.M., were always refused

<sup>1</sup> Still wider was the response of Trades Councils and union branches to the March of 1934, which climaxed in a Congress of Unity and Action where the 1,500 delegates included representatives of 245 branches of 50 different unions (including 81 delegates from 43 branches of Mr. Bevin's union). The public interest aroused was intense and the Government was shortly compelled to restore the 1931 cuts in unemployed benefit. The March of 1936 surpassed even this record, for it got Mr. Attlee, leader of the Labour Party, and Wal Hannington on to the same platform. In its annual report for 1936 the London Trades Council observed that "the most significant feature of the march was the support given by people of all classes, creeds and politics . . . this wave of sympathy should serve as an impetus to the Labour movement to seek ways and means of harnessing the great forces of public opinion in the fight" against the Means Test, the March's particular object.

admission (refusals backed with unceremonious displays of force by the local constabulary, horse and foot), even though there was a wide feeling in Congress that they should be heard. Nor was the political character of the refusal disguised. Thus Secretary Citrine declared at Newcastle (1932) that the N.U.W.M. was "a subsidiary of the Communist Party," aiming "to hold up the General Council to ridicule and contumely,"<sup>1</sup> and at Brighton (1933) proclaimed his objection to "allowing people to advocate a united front by a backdoor method."

The political leadership assumed by the union High Command, with Mr. Bevin as Commander-in-Chief and Sir Walter Citrine as Chief of Staff, was inspired by the same outlook as their industrial leadership. No opposition to, but full collaboration with, the governing class. This appeared clearly over the basic political issues that came to occupy the attention of the trade union movement, summed up in the twin menace of Fascism and War, which assumed its most urgent aspect with the placing in power of Hitler and the Nazi Party in Germany in 1933.

There was no lack of evidence of the potential strength that the union leaders could command if they desired to make a firm stand. On the industrial front unrest and militancy were marked. The preceding conflicts in Lancashire were entirely eclipsed by the weavers' strike in the summer of 1932, whose stormy battles to pull out the "knobsticks," and mass marches

<sup>1</sup> Typifying the contrary view was Mr. Dawson (Textile Workers), who said that he was no Communist, but "a loyal officer of the trade union movement who has stood four-square on all occasions with the movement." He urged that Congress should not "waste time as to who is behind this unemployed organisation." "Do not," he begged, "be sidetracked by Mr. Citrine's reference. . . . What he has said may be correct. I do not challenge it at all, but as men and women facing this problem, we ought to be able to co-operate with either angels from heaven or fiends from hell."

from town to town to close down all mills, recalled the insurrectionary General Strike of 1842 ; despite police violence and repeated "intimidation" gaolings under the 1927 Act, the weavers fought on to the end of September, when the final enforcement of wage-cuts and the more-looms system left the cotton industry seething. In London that same summer the busmen successfully checked a severe attack on wages and conditions, which their union (the T. & G.W.U.) was prepared to accept, by organising the London Busmen's Rank-and-File Movement, embracing a majority of the bus branches ; next January this Movement led an unofficial strike—jointly condemned by the union executive and the employers—against speed-up, and concessions were gained. On the anti-fascist front a newly vigilant public opinion (reflected in the establishment of the Council of Civil Liberties) was aroused by sinister Government measures like the Incitement to Disaffection Act, while provocative demonstrations by the Mosleyites at Olympia and in Hyde Park were met by impressive counter-demonstrations—which the General Council ineffectively sought to boycott.

Unhappily these factors do not appear to have been taken into account ; nor was heed paid to the lessons of disunity, passivity and capitulation suggested by the collapse of German Social-Democracy. In March 1933 the T.U.C. General Council and the Labour Party Executive rejected joint action proposed by the Communist Party and the I.L.P. and instead the National Council of Labour issued a manifesto entitled *Democracy versus Dictatorship*. This document linked together the dictatorship of Fascism and the dictatorship of the working class (called "reaction on the 'Left'"), described the Labour Party as "the spearhead of political power against dictators, Fascist

or Communist," and told the workers that their "historic task today is to uphold the principles of Social-Democracy." The mischievous bracketing of the Soviets and Fascism was repeated at the Brighton T.U.C. in September 1933, when Sir Walter Citrine spoke to a General Council statement on Fascism—a helpless review which presented Fascism as an automatic and inevitable product of deepening crisis and growing unemployment. "In Great Britain, just as in Germany," said Sir Walter, "we have a serious unemployment problem. If unemployment gets more desperate neither myself nor any member of the General Council will be prepared to answer for the consequences." Referring to the collapse of the German leaders, Sir Walter limited himself to the pious ejaculation: "I hope to God we are never put into a similar position."

The development of policy on war was even more singular. That the movement was of one mind in its uncompromising opposition to war was made clear at the autumn conferences in 1933. At the Hastings Conference of the Labour Party a resolution, accepted by the Executive, was carried unanimously and with acclamation pledging the Party "to take no part in war and to resist it with the whole force of the Labour movement . . . including a General Strike." At the Brighton T.U.C. similar sentiments were voiced in a resolution moved by the A.S.L.E. & F., and the whole matter was referred to the General Council to report further to a special congress or specially summoned conference of union executives. Then things began to happen. No special conference was held. A joint committee appointed by the National Council of Labour occupied some months in discussions from which there "emerged the fact that it would be impossible to lay down a definite line of action for all future

emergencies." Sir Walter Citrine announced the sensational discovery that a General Strike against war would be illegal (a truism that had been fully appreciated in the Hastings debate). Arguments redolent of Mr. Bevin's views were propounded ; such as that the sole responsibility of resistance to war should not rest upon the unions, and that there could be no refusal to handle munitions since that would also lead to a General Strike

In June 1934 these signs of a turnabout came to a head in a statement by the National Council prescribing the " duty of supporting our Government unflinchingly " in the event of war, qualified as military " support of the League in restraining an aggressor nation." The qualification was only the sugar on the pill ; opposition to war had been switched to support for war. Mr. Rowlands (Painters) summed up the feelings of many when he told the following T.U.C., at Weymouth, that " the Labour leaders in 1914 waited until war broke out before going over to the support of their Government. In this report they were going over before the war started." Nevertheless the T.U.C. endorsed the new policy, as did the Labour Party at Southport, Mr. Bevin oddly averring that " what they did was to keep the weapon of the General Strike " (this was the last that was heard of it).

Parallel with all this, however, rank-and-file activity continued unabated. There was a series of strikes at large factories in the high-speed and little unionised " new " industries, together with wage movements among the railwaymen, engineers and miners ; in the South Wales coalfield the structure of the S.W.M.F. was refashioned and democratised, under militant leadership summed up in the presidency of Arthur Horner, and its greatly shrunk membership rapidly increased again. The position was recognised

by Mr. A. Conley (Garment Workers) in his presidential address to the Weymouth T.U.C. Noting that "piecemeal wage movements are on foot," he urged that "these sporadic and unco-ordinated movements should be linked together in a disciplined and ordered effort to carry the unions forward as a united body." The point was not taken. Indeed Weymouth drew the complacent City comment that "the trade union wing of the Labour Party is not really interested . . . in destroying the so-called capitalist system."<sup>1</sup> Nor, to turn the phrase around, was the Labour Party wing of the trade unions. The Southport conference adopted a new programme, *For Socialism and Peace*, in place of the MacDonaldite *Labour and the Nation*; it was described by the Socialist League opposition as "not a plan for Socialism, but a repetition of the 1929 attempt to work within declining capitalism"; indeed as "a form of organisation leading to the Corporate State."

The year 1935 marked a turning point. It began with the most striking demonstration since 1920 that a united working-class defence could defeat a Government attack, no matter how inflated the Parliamentary majority. The occasion was the scheduled operation on January 7th of Part II of the new Unemployment Act, which stiffened the Means Test and was accompanied by relief scales inflicting heavy cuts. South Wales and Sheffield were the main centres of the storm that arose. The South Wales Miners' Federation Executive took the initiative in calling an all-in conference of trade union and all working-class organisations, irrespective of political colour; around the united front thus established the mass of the population gathered and on February 3rd astonishing demonstrations up and down the mining valleys rallied no

<sup>1</sup> *The Economist*, September 8th, 1934.



less than 800,000 persons. Unemployment Assistance Board premises were stormed and wrecked. The ruling class were flung into what Premier Baldwin called a "curious state of hysteria and panic"; and the Government hastily cancelled the cuts.

How did the movement's High Command react in this situation when, as *The Times* put it, "the spirit of 1926, which produced the General Strike, is showing itself again"? Appeals from the left for unity were rejected, as before, by the General Council and the Labour Party Executive. When the united movement was under way the National Council of Labour issued an "Appeal to the National Conscience," urging "all leaders of public opinion . . . in no partisan spirit" to concern themselves with the "lamentable state of affairs." To appeals from their constituents on the scene of action the General Council returned supercilious and hostile answers.<sup>1</sup> Yet the general upward swing brought by this victory of unity was soon shown in leaping Labour by-election votes, in numerous local strike successes and in a national forward move by the

<sup>1</sup> In a letter to the General Council the Abertillery Trades Council alleged that the T.U.C. "never gave a lead to the workers to fight and resist this attack. . . . Take our local position; before the Council took an official part in this present movement, 7,000 employed and unemployed demonstrated to the U.A.B. on this matter. The N.U.W.M. initiated this movement and it gained mass support. Then the Council associated itself with the united front, which embraced all organisations, including ministers of the church and shopkeepers. This movement has extended right throughout the country. . . . We call upon the T.U.C. to get on with the fight. . . . All we ask for is action." To this the organising department of the General Council retorted that "it appears that your Council feel that the action taken by a few Communists in South Wales is of more importance than the deputation to the Minister of Labour and the debates in the House of Commons—a point of view with which I can only express surprise. . . . The fact that your Council are connected with the united front will be reported to the appropriate committee of the General Council at their next meeting." (Quoted in Wal Hannington, *Unemployed Struggles*, 1919-36, p. 311.)

miners ; the M.F.G.B. decided to campaign for a wage increase and a national agreement, securing a majority of 98 per cent. for strike action, and national attention was centred on the successful " stay-down " strike at Nine Mile Point in Monmouthshire.

It is a matter of history that the General Council, far from developing the successful action against the Unemployment Act into a counter-attack all along the line, turned its fire still more keenly against unity. In March it adopted two circulars (Nos. 16 and 17, generally referred to simply as the " Black Circular "), ordering Trades Councils to ban delegates who were Communists or had any associations with Communists, and requesting unions to modify their rules so as to exclude Communists from any office.<sup>1</sup> Wide exception was taken to this and the M.F.G.B., the three railway unions, the Transport Workers, Woodworkers, Engineers, Distributive Workers, Painters, Electrical Trades, with many smaller societies, went on record against the " Black Circular." At the Margate T.U.C. in September 1935 the disruptive recommendation was only endorsed (by 1,869,000 votes to 1,274,000)

<sup>1</sup> Answering the conventional charge of " disruption," the Communists later declared that there was " one piece of disruption to which we plead guilty. We have disrupted non-political unionism for ever." J. R. Campbell said : " For eight years after 1926, the dominant right wing leadership in the mining industry refused to tackle non-political unionism either in South Wales or in Notts. It was only when Communist leadership began to dominate in the anthracite coalfield, only when that Communist leadership attacked the non-political union at the Emlyn Colliery, only on the basis of that success that the South Wales miners were encouraged, again under Communist influence, to go forward to attack Taft Merthyr and to storm the citadel of non-political unionism in South Wales, Bedwas itself. Without the victories in South Wales, the M.F.G.B. would never have supported Harworth when Harworth, again under Communist leadership, came out in the fight against non-political unionism." (*Report of the Fourteenth Congress of the C.P.G.B.* 1937, p. 112.)

after a reported last-minute swing-over of the Transport Workers' vote. The other side of the medal was seen in the acceptance of honours, amid a flood of protests; most notable being the star and purple ribbon of Knight Commander of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire conferred on Mr. Walter M. Citrine. It was a "generous admission," purred the *Daily Telegraph*, "that those also serve who oppose the Government of the day." And the year was rounded off by the first striking demonstration of what the new war policy of the movement meant in practice. Entirely uncritical support was accorded to the Government over the Abyssinia-Sanctions crisis, Premier Baldwin's most successful confidence trick; used to hamstring the opposition at the General Election that November, after which the Prime Minister unsealed his lips to announce that the real business—general rearmament—would forthwith begin.

Rearmament introduced a "boom" period—unemployment fell in 1937 to the "low" level of  $1\frac{1}{2}$  millions from its 1932 height of  $2\frac{3}{4}$  millions—which threw a most significant light on the working out in practice of the industrial policy of the General Council leadership. The bounding output for which Sir Walter Citrine had yearned in his 1927 statement was certainly being achieved; but it was equally certainly not providing any "rising standard of life and continuously improving conditions of employment." One index of productivity showed a rise of 20 per cent. in the five years from 1932 to 1937.<sup>1</sup> But net real wages were static or declining while relatively to the total wealth produced wages fell enormously. During the "boom" years from 1935-7 wages rose on the average

<sup>1</sup> Jurgen Kuczynski, *The Condition of the Workers in Great Britain, Germany and the Soviet Union*, 1932-38, p. 59.

by 7·6 per cent., but the cost of living rose by 8·2 per cent. and industrial profits rose by 25 per cent. In 1937 itself profits rose by 17 per cent. to a new high record while a wage increase of 4 per cent. was more than offset by a cost of living rise of 6 per cent.<sup>1</sup> The worsening of the position of the working class relative to that of the wealthy could be expressed in index form thus: taking 1932 as 100 that relative position in 1937 had declined to 84.<sup>2</sup>

The 1927 Citrine statement had referred in passing to the necessity for "adequate wages"; the policy of Sir Walter and his colleagues produced nothing but wages of the most sensational inadequacy. To compare, say, even the wage-rates of 1920 with those of 1934 was startling enough. The average fall was nearly 40 per cent., but for skilled workers in basic industries much higher (e.g. miners 58 per cent., iron and steel workers 57½ per cent., textile workers nearly 50 per cent.). In terms of money it could be calculated that in 1936 weekly wages of skilled men averaged £3 to £3 10s., or unskilled men somewhat over £2 to £2 10s., of women 27s. to 28s.<sup>3</sup>

What standard of life did these figures represent? One so low that "even on the intolerable Bowley standard an appallingly high proportion of the total working-class population has been found to be below the 'poverty line' in recent social surveys"—for example in Merseyside, Southampton, London.<sup>4</sup> If the Rowntree "human needs" standard, which was low enough in all conscience, were taken instead of Professor Bowley's "bare subsistence" standard the proportion leapt so that in London one-third of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Economist*, May 14th, 1938.

<sup>2</sup> Jurgen Kuczynski, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> G. D. H. and M. I. Cole, *The Condition of Britain*, pp. 244, 249-52.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 260-1.

households were below or near the poverty line, and another third not very much above it. Applying the Rowntree standard to separate industries it could be demonstrated that in mining 80 per cent. of the workers were below the poverty line, in public utility services 57 per cent., in building 50 per cent., in textiles 46 per cent.<sup>1</sup> In broad terms of public health the meaning of all this was authoritatively revealed by leading nutrition experts like Sir John Orr and the late Dr. M'Gonigle; their researches disclosed that no less than one-half the entire population were below a satisfactory nutritional level—in other words that number of people just could not afford to buy enough of the right foods to maintain them in full health.

In the light of this situation the complete failure to take advantage of the boom was the more noteworthy. So respectable an authority as Mr. G. D. H. Cole wrote :

Now, assuredly, is the time both for the organised workers to win advances by militant action and for the movement to bring effectively within its ranks the mass of unorganised workers in the rapidly-developing new industries and services. But the old leaders only found, in the recent boom, a new excuse for inaction. Every sign of trade union militancy can now be attributed to the machinations of a handful of Communists, who have somehow found the art of being in a hundred places at once, and in whom it is regarded as a crime to induce non-unionists to join a trade union, or to suggest to the workers that they had better act promptly, while profits are high, instead of staying quiet until the precarious chance passes away.<sup>2</sup>

This unshakable passivity and inactivity of the top leadership had an inevitable result; the crop of unofficial strikes grew luxuriant. Many key aircraft

<sup>1</sup> Jurgen Kuczynski, *op cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> G. D. H. Cole and others, *British Trade Unionism Today*, p. 540.

concerns were affected by strikes, frequently for the recognition of shop stewards, whose valiant efforts on the job were making this speedily expanding industry a stronghold of trade unionism, and who shortly came together to establish an Aircraft Shop Stewards' National Council, forerunner of similar organisation in other industries. The miners' fight against "non-political" unionism was mirrored in bitter strikes at Taff Merthyr in South Wales and Harworth in Nottinghamshire, where the Trade Union Act and the new Public Order Act were used to gaol many of the most active people. In the end the "non-pols" went down for the count and the Spencer Union in Notts reunited with the *bona fide* Notts Miners' Association.<sup>1</sup> There was unrest among railwaymen, postal workers, busmen; the strike of the London busmen during the Coronation celebrations in 1937 produced some sensations—not least the farce of the union executive keeping the tramwaymen at work—and led to a temporary purge of militants in the T. & G.W.U., with the consequent formation, against the strong opposition of the Communists and their supporters, of a breakaway union. Of prime importance was the movement among engineer apprentices, which produced a strike of 18,000 lads on the Clyde in April 1937 and nearly 20,000 in Lancashire and the Midlands in September; at a national apprentices' conference in Manchester 84,000 lads from near a score of different centres were represented and made a call for national strike action to enforce their demands for wage increases, proper training and so on; for the first time the employers were induced to recognise the right of the A.E.U. to negotiate on behalf of the apprentices.

Passivity also made itself evident in regard to the

<sup>1</sup> See footnote to p. 183 above.

basic problem of organisation confronting the trade union movement—namely, of building itself strongly in those newer, mass-production industries which remained almost entirely unorganised. The magnitude of the problem could be gauged from these few examples; in the miscellaneous metal trades only 5 per cent. were organised; in food, drink and tobacco the same; in automobiles 15 per cent.; in the distributive trades 11 per cent.; and the mass of workers here concerned was some four million. Clearly the solution to this problem was not to be found in traditional and sporadic campaigns of leaflet distribution. It required, as the Communists pointed out, “that the trade union leaders stop fighting their own militants and start mobilising the working-class to storm the Bastille of unorganised labour,” by a sustained national campaign for wage increases, the forty-hour week, new industrial legislation, by co-ordinated union action and the building of trade union unity; with attention to the special problems of female labour and youth.<sup>1</sup> To remain in complacent contemplation of the gradual turn in the tide of union membership that began in 1935 was to toy with the problem; and just as it was only by “mass-movements from below that trade unionism has won its present degree of power and recognition,” so it appeared that now “a new mass-movement of the same character” was needed.<sup>2</sup>

From the facts already set forth it will be apparent that any such revivifying forward movement in trade unionism must inevitably conflict, and sharply, with the dominant leadership. The point was confirmed by

<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Fourteenth Congress of the C.P.G.B.*, 1937, pp. 96-116.

<sup>2</sup> Cole, *op. cit.*, pp. 525-6, 534. The T.U.C. in 1935 reported an increase of 94,000 in affiliated membership (the first increase since 1930). Later increases were 225,000 (1936), nearly 400,000 (1937), 452,000 (1938), 208,000 (1939), 198,000 (1940), 212,000 (1941).

the further development of official policy on the wider political issues. Here the manner in which the controllers of the trade union machine swung their weight behind the policies of the governing class was truly phenomenal.

Endorsement of rearmament was put over at the 1937 conferences, after a period of confusion the previous year. Though the official statement, *International Policy and Defence*, in form adumbrated a foreign policy of collective security, it was sufficiently clear that the heart of the matter was support of rearmament under the reactionary "appeasing" government of the late Mr. Neville Chamberlain. "Rearmament cannot await the advent of a Labour Government," said Sir Walter Citrine at the Norwich T.U.C., while the Executive spokesman at the Bournemouth Labour Party conference, Mr. James Walker (Iron and Steel Trades), delivered what the *Manchester Guardian* called "the first big Labour conference speech for a generation that has struck the patriotic note."

When Fascism struck in Spain, the Chamberlain Government sided with General Franco (and his Nazi and Italian backers) through the foul farce of "non-intervention." Though the movement, and democratic opinion in general, was more aroused and enthused by the Spanish struggle than it had been since the days of the Council of Action, Mr. Bevin and Sir Walter Citrine were outstanding in their efforts to keep it a "quiescent partner" in the Government's "hellish duplicity."<sup>1</sup> And this, by the most incredible manipulations of the issue, they contrived to do during the supremely critical opening

<sup>1</sup> To apply a phrase of Mr. John Hill, the veteran ex-secretary of the Boilermakers and sometime member of the General Council. (*Daily Herald*, January 8th, 1937.)



period of the Spanish War. Their performance at the Plymouth T.U.C. in 1936 won the approving comment from Sir Samuel Hoare at the Conservative Party conference that "the wise attitude adopted by the Trades Union Congress over the Spanish crisis shows that in the ranks of Labour there is a solid force of patriotic responsibility." And even when this disastrous policy was later reversed, no aid-for-Spain campaign was ever officially conducted on the scale that the occasion demanded.<sup>1</sup>

When the Fascist offensive switched eastward with the rape of Austria in March 1938, the leadership again enabled Mr. Chamberlain to get away with it. There was a first-class political crisis and the Government tottered ; but the National Council of Labour never gave the lead that could have pushed it over. Instead the Council lamely announced that it would await the Prime Minister's declaration of policy. Next day the General Council of the T.U.C. were summoned to Downing Street, and listened obediently to Mr. Chamberlain's appeal for the "goodwill and help" of Labour. The arch-appeaser had been saved, and was able to proceed to his final triumph of Munich and the destruction of democracy's last bastion in Central Europe ; for the later declarations of solidarity with the Czechoslovak Republic, endorsed at the Blackpool T.U.C. in September 1938, remained verbal declarations. Indeed it was at that Congress that Sir Walter Citrine gave one of the most astonishing performances in defence of the General Council's policy of pro-Chamberlain passivity. The then critical position of the Spanish Republic had inspired a general desire for effective solidarity action, and an organised embargo

<sup>1</sup> A detailed documentation of this disastrous attitude to the Spanish War may be found in Hutt, *Post-War History*, Chap. XI.

on exports to Franco Spain was suggested. Sir Walter, however, indicated that such action would be a breach of the Trade Union Act and would involve the confiscation of union funds; alternatively that such action was impossible because the T. & G.W.U. (meaning, of course, Mr. Bevin) was against it. Comment is superfluous on this rehash of Sir Walter's 1934 arguments against action to stop war, referred to above<sup>1</sup>.

Nor was there any foundation for the interpretation that the General Council leadership, in their unconditional support for the Government, were merely expressing the view of their affiliated unions. This was seen when the key union for war production, the A.E.U., met Ministers in 1938 to discuss industrial policy, dilution, etc., in the light of rearmament. The line taken by the engineers was the opposite of that taken by the General Council; they raised inconvenient "political" questions at the outset (arms for Spain, the Government's encouragement of Fascist Powers). Similarly when the General Council early in 1939 responded without question to the Government's approaches for collaboration in national service schemes, it was repudiated by important bodies like the Distributive Workers and the Shop Assistants.

In general during these fateful pre-war years the leadership of Mr. Bevin and Sir Walter Citrine was employed to paralyse effective opposition to the

<sup>1</sup> On the same occasion Sir Walter advanced the argument against the wide demand for State control of the so-profitable arms industries that this would involve State control of labour. The monstrous fantasy of this "argument" was to be sufficiently demonstrated with the wartime State control, and conscription, of labour—supported by Sir Walter and expounded by his leading colleague, the Rt. Hon. Ernest Bevin, M.P., Minister of Labour and National Service.

monstrous regiment of Chamberlain by its refusal of any working-class, or general popular and democratic, unity. Communist affiliation to the Labour Party was rejected in 1935-6 with an exhumation of the "Moscow gold" and "violence" bogey, as employed by Mr. MacDonald in 1920-5. The unity campaign launched in 1937 by the Communists, Socialist League and I.L.P., on a programme little different from the Short Programme adopted by the Labour Party, was damned by Mr. Bevin in an engaging comparison of Sir Stafford Cripps with Mosley. The campaigns for a popular front (the *Reynolds News* United Peace Alliance call in 1938; the Cripps Memorandum and Petition in 1939) were crushed to the cry of "Pure Socialism," "Socialism or Surrender." The first pamphlet issued by the Cripps Petition Committee answered :

As the Dictators press their claims for colonies the imperialist ruling classes may have to fight . . . not for democracy but for empire, and they will go into battle stripped of their strategical assets and without the allies they have betrayed. In that desperate struggle would the Labour Party, for the sake of Socialism, refuse its political collaboration ? The chances are that it would again join a National Coalition, this time under Tory leadership. Out of that, with our civil liberties suspended and victory both distant and doubtful, what would emerge is more probably Fascism than Socialism.

That point did not carry at the Labour Party conference in Southport over Whitsun 1939. "We are nearer to power than ever before," cried Mr. Bevin, leading the big battalions to overwhelm this lawyer who then wanted to fight and defeat Chamberlain; and with that cry coupled a remarkable intervention pleading for a pooling of the world's colonial resources in order to give Germany, Japan and Italy their place ;

a new line in "appeasement." The conference concluded with a "Soldiers! To your places" call by Mr. Greenwood. The phrase was more literally apposite than its author may have realised. Trade unionists had attended their last pre-war conference.

## CHAPTER 10 : TRADE UNIONS AND THE WAR (1939-42)

Two years before war broke out the official trade union line had already been adumbrated, in words echoing the Webbs' comments on 1914.<sup>1</sup> At the Norwich T.U.C. in 1937 Sir Walter Citrine said : " I do not believe any Government could wage war of any kind without the backing of the Labour movement." Mr. Ernest Bevin declared that the T.U.C., by which he obviously meant the oligarchic machine of Transport House, had " now virtually become an integral part of the State." With the September days of 1939 the full significance of these observations became evident.

From the start the General Council insisted that they be consulted by the Government on all relevant matters, and this was conceded alike by Mr. Chamberlain and Mr. Churchill. Trades Union Congress representatives were placed on the whole war-time range of governmental committees, dealing with supply, fuel, food, propaganda (information) and so on. As in the last war this process of collaboration implied a great increase in power for the union leaders, which the Government was anxious to guarantee, doubtless mindful of 1914-18's " warning " that " the effectiveness of trade union leadership must be preserved, lest dissatisfied members follow upstart leaders who ride on the crest of grievances." <sup>2</sup> In this

<sup>1</sup> See p. 69 above.

<sup>2</sup> *The Times*, January 25th, 1940.

connection the innocently named Societies (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1940 empowered Union executives, if they so desired, to do what they wished with their rules, and specifically to suspend the normal forms of union democracy—delegate meetings, conferences, ballots, etc.—given the simple sanction of an official functionary, the Registrar-General.<sup>1</sup>

“Integral” collaboration with the State was paralleled by collaboration with the masters of the State, organised Big Business. In October 1939 a Joint Advisory Council was established, giving equal representation to the British Employers’ Confederation and the T.U.C. General Council, and having the Minister of Labour as chairman. The following May a similar but more select body, the Joint Consultative Committee, took the place for practical purposes of the full Council.

A natural accompaniment of this dual collaboration was the so-called political and industrial “truce,” which might more appropriately be described as an attempted demobilisation of the movement. Its “fatally strangulatory effect” on the Labour Party in the localities was soon a commonplace among experienced party workers<sup>2</sup>; as for the unions, branch life and activity slumped during the first year of war. In this last connection the circulation figures of Trade Union Congress publications were significant. Thus in 1940 two leaflets on the vital question of Labour Supply in War-time only circulated respectively 12,000 and 10,000 copies—among a movement with a membership of 5,000,000 organised in at least 25,000 branches. The General Council’s comment

<sup>1</sup> The general vigilance of union members in defence of their normal rights meant that extensive recourse has not in fact been had to these emergency powers.

<sup>2</sup> Garry Allighan, *New Statesman and Nation*, February 1st, 1941.

that "circulation figures for the year are satisfactory" may perhaps serve as a clue to something deeper; for the self-satisfied complacency therein revealed had certainly long been a general characteristic of T.U.C. leadership, accompanied by a masterly passivity and an uncritical acceptance of all official expressions.

When the T.U.C. met at Bridlington in September 1939, on the day after the declaration of war, it received from the General Council no objective analysis of the war, its cause and character, no lines of policy for protecting the economic and social interests of the working class. Next year the Congress met at Southport; the aerial *blitzkrieg* had begun and there was general criticism from the floor on the urgent theme of A.R.P.; but Sir Walter Citrine replied by repeating the official shibboleths then current, e.g. that there was now no time to dig deep shelters. Symptomatic of Southport, too, was the remission of resolutions on such subjects as the restoration of trade union conditions and the capital levy, the "previous questioning" of a resolution demanding the removal of Municheers from the Government, and the rejection of an N.U.R. resolution requiring, in the interests of union democracy, that voting divisions in the General Council should be recorded.

The war naturally brought great changes in political and class relationships. Defence Regulations 18B (power to imprison without trial and without charge) and 2D (power to suppress newspapers without stating a case and with no appeal) typified the new dictatorial powers of the Executive. The domination of all the State industrial controls by big business representatives made the "war Socialism" of which some ignorantly spoke no more than "the bastard Socialism of the vested interests," as Sir Arthur Salter put it. There was outrageous profiteering and mis-

management. As for the condition of the working class, authoritative surveys showed how the first year of war brought a sharp decline ; in the large London borough of Islington, for instance, it was found that six out of seven families were driven below their peace-time standards, while in a munitions centre like Coventry barely one-half of the families had increased their incomes, with 20 per cent. of the remainder falling even below the pre-war level.<sup>1</sup>

Some wage increases were grudgingly conceded in the early part of 1940, notably to the miners, engineers and railwaymen ; but they did not average more than half the amounts reasonably demanded. The Joint Advisory Council above-mentioned prepared memoranda on the evils of "excessive wages," though no agreed policy was reached ; and when compulsory arbitration was introduced, with the forbidding of strikes, in July 1940, the National Tribunal soon showed itself a most parsimonious body (e.g. the engineers, applying for 10s. a week, were awarded 3s. 6d.).

Within the trade union movement the leaders' policy inevitably involved them in still more extreme attacks on all militancy or opposition, first and foremost on the Communists. During the first year of the war the General Council brought under fire a score of Trades Councils.<sup>2</sup> The National Council of Labour played a leading part in the wild anti-Soviet campaign over the war in Finland ; its representatives sat in committee with the friends of Franco. Leaders of the T.U.C. were in the forefront of the attack on the

<sup>1</sup> *Economic Journal*, July 1940.

<sup>2</sup> Critical working-class sentiments had been voiced, for example, by the Trades Councils of Glasgow (which created a stir by convoking a wide anti-war conference) and Cardiff (which called for a campaign to overthrow the Chamberlain "Government of the ruling class of bankers and capitalists, opposed to the interests of the workers").



*Daily Worker* ; first through the libel action brought by Sir Walter Citrine and others, and then, with the judgment gained as a basis, taking the unprecedented step of excluding *Worker* reporters from the 1940 Congress.<sup>1</sup>

A different picture was presented by the rank-and-file. In the first three months of war there were forty local and factory strikes ; and in 1940, while the number of days lost in industrial disputes was a low record, the total number of disputes was the third highest for ten years—strikes were small and short, in fact, but there were a lot of them. From many union branches came sharp protests at the Finnish war's anti-Soviet orgy ; as later came a mounting wave of protest at the suppression of the *Daily Worker*. On the political side it was significant that of the 200 resolutions on the agenda for the Bournemouth Labour Party Conference at Whitsun 1940, there were fifty on the political truce, the vast majority demanding its end ; discussion was shelved on the pretext of the entry of the Labour leaders into Mr. Churchill's Government on the eve of the conference.

Steadily the factory basis of the forward movement became more evident and important. The first national shop stewards' conference met at Birmingham in April 1940. Over 217,000 workers in the engineering and allied trades were represented by 282 delegates from 107 factories. It was decided to move for the

<sup>1</sup> The subsequent suppression underlined the protest of delegate W. Smart (Building Trade Workers), who said that " the action of the General Council . . . constitutes not only a vicious attack on the freedom of the press, but the signal for further attacks by the Government against the working class, its press and its organisations. . . . Congress is being asked, through the General Council, to become the instrument of the Government whereby Mr. Morrison can achieve what Sir John Anderson failed to accomplish, namely, an attack upon a working-class newspaper."

establishment of a co-ordinated national shop stewards' movement, and a lengthy resolution outlined an agreed policy, including the achievement of 100 per cent. trade unionism among all workers (including women), increased wages, better workshop conditions, defence of democracy within the unions.<sup>1</sup>

The fighting spirit of the engineers found keen expression in the highest authority of the A.E.U., its National Committee. At the Committee's session in November 1940, the Clyde delegates moved for the taking of a strike ballot on the demand for a 10s. increase. "Most of the speeches were in favour of extreme action"<sup>2</sup> and the Clyde motion was eventually only defeated by 25 votes to 11.

Union and factory representation was a feature of the People's Convention which gathered in London in January 1941. Among the two-thousand odd delegates there were 665 from 497 union organisations and 471 from 239 factories, who endorsed the Convention's eight-point programme for a People's Government, aiming at the democratic defence of the people against Fascism both at home and abroad—in the closest unity with the Soviet Union—at the raising of living standards, and the safeguarding and extension of trade union and all democratic rights. Evidence of widening support for such a policy was provided some months later, again by the National Committee of the A.E.U. After a long and impassioned debate the engineers' grand council went on record in favour of the Convention programme by 29 votes to 21. The news made a sensation in the papers of June 21st, 1941.

Next day came the treacherous Nazi assault on the

<sup>1</sup> The full text of the resolution will be found in Wal Hannington, *Industrial History in Wartime*, pp. 113-19. The conference was the origin of the Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards' National Council.

<sup>2</sup> *News Chronicle*, November 29th, 1940.

Soviet Union. That night Mr. Churchill made his "historic utterance" (Stalin) pledging Britain's full support to the U.S.S.R. At the very moment when the Men of Munich witnessed the sensational achievement of the grand aim of their appeasement policy—a Hitlerite anti-Soviet war—they had to endure the supreme chagrin of seeing Britain on the Soviet side. The war had not, as they hoped, been "switched"; it had been transformed.

The Soviet Union has no imperialist interests or aims; the Soviet Union has from the first day of the conflict made clear that it regards the war as war against the Nazi rulers, not against the German people; it has made clear that victory carries with it the liberation of all peoples oppressed by Fascism. In this way the participation of the Soviet Union has transformed the character of the war.<sup>1</sup>

The transformation came about, though not by any change of government in Britain, on June 22nd, 1941. It marked a historic and complete turning point for the trade union movement as for everything and everybody else.

A typical early reaction of the great mass of trade unionists was summed up by President J. H. Potts in his opening address to the N.U.R. conference at Swansea on July 7th:

Now that Russia has become the victim of the aggressive designs of the Fascist States we must see that all the influence of the friends of Fascism in our Government is destroyed. We must see that there shall be no further hesitation in taking steps so that we shall become close and loyal allies and that there shall be one single fighting unit for the destruction of Nazism and Fascism wherever they exist.

It was evident that the full alliance established

<sup>1</sup> Notes of the Month, *Labour Monthly*, August 1941, p. 855.

between Britain and the U.S.S.R. with the agreement of July 12th required a parallel trade union bond, for the new situation confronted the unions with new tasks, new duties. The T.U.C. General Council took the initiative in proposing the establishment of an Anglo-Soviet Trade Union Committee. This proposal was endorsed with acclamation at the Edinburgh Congress in September and the first meeting of the Committee was held in Moscow the following month, the T.U.C. delegation being headed by Chairman Frank Wolstencroft (Woodworkers) and Secretary Sir Walter Citrine. The Moscow meeting made its mark by concluding the following unanimous agreement :

1. To unite the British and Soviet trade unions in the organisation of mutual aid in the war against Hitlerite Germany.

2. To render all possible assistance to the Governments of the U.S.S.R. and Great Britain in their common war for the defeat of Hitlerite Germany.

3. To strengthen the industrial effort of both countries with a view to the maximum increase in the output of tanks, aircraft, guns, shells and other munitions.

4. To support the cause of maximum assistance in arms to the Soviet Union on the part of Great Britain.

5. To make use of all means of propaganda such as the Press, radio, cinema, workers' meetings, etc., in the struggle against Hitlerism.

6. To render all possible assistance to the peoples of the countries occupied by Hitler Germany who are fighting for liberation from the Hitlerite yoke, for their independence and for the re-establishment of their democratic liberties.

7. To organise mutual aid and exchange of information between the trade unions of the U.S.S.R. and Great Britain.

8. To strengthen personal contact between the representatives of the trade union movement of the U.S.S.R. and Great Britain.

This historic agreement, duly ratified by the General Council of the T.U.C. and the Presidium of the Central Council of Trade Unions of the U.S.S.R., did not meet with the instant follow-up on the British side which many anticipated. The next step in carrying it forward was not taken until the arrival here, at the turn of the year, of a delegation of Soviet trade unionists headed by N. M. Shvernik and K. I. Nikolaeva, joint secretaries of the A.U.C.C.T.U. It can safely be said that Shvernik and his colleagues gave the British movement a striking fraternal demonstration of the nature of real trade union leadership in an anti-Fascist war of the present kind. Speaking to the T.U.C. General Council on January 2nd, 1942, Shvernik laid the first emphasis on British-Soviet trade union unity and friendship, "which must be daily reinforced." He went on to stress that the entire union machine and movement "must be brought into full action," especially in organising the workers to carry out every war measure.

We are bound constantly to explain to the mass of the workers the importance of such measures (he said), and their bearing on the aim of victory over Hitlerism. This involves, in our opinion, the constant improvement of our mass explanatory work, and patient efforts to see that every trade unionist should understand all the implications of what is going on, and should honestly and self-sacrificingly carry out everything that the cause of the struggle with Hitlerism requires of him.

At the same time there was the "fundamental and dominant problem" of increasing the output of armaments, which meant so organising that every individual worker could and would increase his or her productivity of labour.

The Soviet delegation made a tour of the country which rapidly turned into a triumphal progress. They

visited some sixty war factories, mines and shipyards ; there they were greeted by the workers, as well as at the mass meetings they addressed in the principal industrial centres, with unrestrained enthusiasm. In a considered summing-up of their visit, Shvernik paid tribute to the "splendid morale" of British working men and women, particularly valuable because British war industry needed to increase the tempo of its work. In tackling speedily this last problem the delegation pointed especially to industry's "very considerable unutilised reserves," represented thus :

The insufficient utilisation in a number of factories of the equipment, machine tools, lathes, etc., on hand, the inadequate introduction of women into industry in spite of the decision of the British Government on this subject; an incorrect attitude in some factories to the initiative of the working men and women, to their rationalising proposals ; unwillingness to listen to the voice of working men and women and their shop stewards ; and even, in individual factories, in limiting the level of output.<sup>1</sup>

If any factory wanted to discover where its unused reserves lay, and what to do about them, all that was necessary was "to have a talk with the working men and women."

Since June 22nd, indeed, the working men and women themselves had been talking plenty. Talking—and acting. Long before that day of great change there had been a mounting wave of revelations of the waste, mismanagement and chaos in too many factories ; trade union inquiries, shop stewards' meetings and deputations to ministers, had made these a matter of common knowledge. What now happened—something without precedent, something truly new—was

<sup>1</sup> This view was subsequently endorsed in the Reports on Man-Power and Production presented by the Select Committee on National Expenditure (April 1942).

the putting forward by the workers of *positive* proposals for maximising output in place of the previous essentially *negative* exposures. And here again it was the rank and file and the N.C.O.s of the factory front, the workers on the job and their shop stewards, who took the lead.

A foremost part was played by the Engineering and Allied Trades Shop Stewards' National Council and its organ the *New Propellor*. This body organised an all-London production conference on August 28rd, 1941, and followed it up with a national conference on October 19th. No one who attended this remarkable gathering in the Stoll Theatre, London, would deny, I think, that it was the most striking, indeed sensational, working-class and trade union assembly of the war.<sup>1</sup> From some 300 factories, works and yards in the key war industries there came 1,237 delegates representing half a million builders and repairers of ships, makers of tanks and planes and guns and shells. Compared with the shop stewards' first national conference in the spring of 1940 there were over four times as many delegates, three times as many factories and well over twice the number of workers represented. The quality of the representation was likewise remarkable. Responsible delegates were here speaking in the name of workers at great munition plants whose names are household words—Vickers-Armstrong, John Brown, Humber-Hillman, Fairfields, Cammell Laird, Thornycroft, Harland & Wolff, Metropolitan-Vickers, Bristol and Gloucester Aircraft, de Havillands, Napiers.

Perhaps the biggest thing about the conference of October 19th was that it did not abstract the problem

<sup>1</sup> The reader may be referred to my report of the conference, "Production—Key to Victory," in the *Labour Monthly*, November 1941.

of production from the whole problem of total war. Its essential slogan could be expressed as "work and fight"—the emphasis being equal. *Fight*: the conference gave its loudest applause to the demand for the opening of a Western Front. *Work*: the conference acclaimed the detailed proposals placed before it for increasing production by scrapping traditional methods, craft exclusiveness and demarcation, by training women to do the most skilled jobs (and also training them in trade union organisation). At the heart of the matter lay the proposal for the formation of Joint Production Committees in every factory, with full facilities for shop steward participation. The industrial potentialities awaiting this new approach, with its unleashing of the mighty force of the workers' own initiative, were suggested at the conference. Delegate after delegate told, Stakhanov-like, of a trebling of output of a gun part here, of a schedule reduced from 40 to 12 hours there, of a special job for the U.S.S.R. completed in two days instead of seven.

In the ensuing months the shop stewards manfully played their part in carrying out the line of this conference. Joint Production Committees multiplied. In February 1942 it was announced that the Government proposed to institute such committees in all its Ordnance Factories, while the Minister of Labour initiated discussions with the employers and the Trades Union Congress for the establishment of production committees in all undertakings scheduled under the Essential Work Order. Eventually a National Advisory Committee of representatives of the engineering trade unions and of the Trades Union Congress General Council was set up to co-ordinate the work of the Production Committees in engineering, the first industry affected.

Joint District Committees in the various areas will



receive nominations from the workers at the factories for seats on the Production Committees and will co-operate with the employers in supervising the ballot vote.<sup>1</sup>

To sum up : in the year since the first edition of this book was completed there has been a change so sweeping that there is much to do in making its full import clear to all. The trade unions, and every single trade unionist, face a vital task in the great drive for production and in rallying every worker to the arduous but exhilarating effort of total war in a just cause. That the response can and will be tremendous the conference of October 19th, the visit of the Soviet delegation, the enthusiasm and initiative shown in scores of war factories, alike bear witness.

As an essential means to this end, however, there remains the problem of unity ; a problem that is yet unsolved. The plain fact is that you cannot, in all sense and sincerity, unite with the Soviet Communists and refuse the hand of brotherhood to British Communists. Unfortunately, the leading group of the T.U.C. General Council continue to harden their hearts in regard to this acid test of unity. On July 31st, 1941, the General Council joined with the Labour Party Executive to state that, though new proposals of common action between them and the Communist Party had been made, "they see nothing in the situation which would justify such collaboration." In September, at the Edinburgh T.U.C., President George Gibson emphasised, while welcoming the U.S.S.R. as an ally, that the C.P. was still beyond the pale—"the astonishing gyrations of these people

<sup>1</sup> The Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Confederation of Engineering and Shipbuilding Trade Unions, representing some forty separate organisations, the National Union of Foundry Workers, and the Association of Engineering and Shipbuilding Draughtsmen, are the unions concerned.

have placed them in the lowest category in the esteem of the British working class.”<sup>1</sup> In December Transport House was able to record a victorious end to a prolonged campaign, in the final pushing through the country’s premier Trades Council, London, of the red-baiting “Black Circular” of 1935.

Sir Walter Citrine and his colleagues have, however, made some significant moves with the times. Of that the Edinburgh Congress was eloquent. Reference has already been made to the General Council’s proposal for Anglo-Soviet trade union unity and its important results. On the basic question of wages there was no more of the earlier talk of the “dangers” of “excessive wages.” Sir Walter himself exploded the myth of war workers’ wealth by citing the simple fact that as against a 30 per cent. rise in the cost of living the rise in wages was only 20 per cent. ; and Congress endorsed the General Council’s refusal to accept a flat wage stabilisation policy.

But still more remarkable at Edinburgh was the growing differentiation among the Big Five unions who effectively dominate Congress. On two issues the great general labour unions (Transport Workers, General and Municipal Workers) were isolated and only just scraped through on a card vote. Thus a motion by the National Union of Public Employees requiring the General Council to examine trade union organisation to see whether industrial unionism would not be more effective was only defeated by 2,548,000 votes to 2,384,000. A proposal for the re-admission of the Chemical Workers’ Union (to which the T.G.W.U. and the N.U.G.M.W. are particularly hostile) was only defeated by 2,404,000 votes to

<sup>1</sup> It must be rather difficult for Mr. Gibson to account for the Communist Party increasing its membership from 19,000 odd in November 1941 to 58,000 in May 1942.

2,338,000. Such close card votes on controversial questions are a record.

In individual unions, too, new trends are to be discerned, new forces are rising to leadership. It is scarcely an accident that the A.E.U. should in this respect be once again marching in the van; that the "proud mechanics" of old should be voting on the admission of women (shades of the founding fathers of 1851!), and that they should have elected such noted militants as Joe Scott and Wal Hannington as Executive Councilman and National Organiser respectively. Nor is it an accident that the differentiation noted above should be sharply paralleled in the campaign for the lifting of the ban on the *Daily Worker*. By the spring of 1942 there were thirty national unions affiliated to the T.U.C. on record against the monstrous maintenance of that ban. They represented a membership of nearly 2,300,000 and included a majority of the Big Five; namely the A.E.U., Mineworkers' Federation and N.U.R. In the light of this it appears strange that the General Council should publicly announce that it could not associate itself with the demand for raising the ban. It looked still stranger after the debate at the Labour Party Conference in May, with its striking defeat of the platform by 1,244,000 votes to 1,231,000 in favour of the *Worker*. Trade unionists have not rallied, literally in millions, to demand the *Daily Worker* back as a *party* political issue, but simply because they regard it as an earnest for the fullest mobilisation of the working class of Britain for total war and speedy victory. And that is the issue dominating all others.

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